

DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

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Lecture 1: The Doctrine of Election

Today we begin a new locus, or section, in our survey of Christian doctrine. Some of you may remember that years ago when we first began this course I said we would be structuring our material along the lines of the so-called *loci communes* of classical Protestant theology. These *loci communes* were the chief places or chief themes of Protestant scholastic theology. They would include things like the doctrine of revelation, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, and so forth. And we've surveyed these so far. Today we come to a new section in our course on the doctrine of salvation. This locus lies at the very heart of Christian theology. Because it addresses the problem that we've already been discussing; namely, our sin and guilt before a holy and righteous God, and how God has chosen to deal with it in order to bring about our salvation.

As with every aspect of Christian doctrine, the doctrine of salvation is also a matter of controversy. So we want to begin by looking at the doctrine of election, first from a Calvinist point of view and then an Arminian point of view. I am not going to be discussing the original views of the Swiss Reformer John Calvin or the Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius. This isn't an attempt to do historical theology. Rather we are going to look at what passes under their names in theology today which is done in a Calvinist mode or in an Arminian mode. What we will do is look at a couple of key New Testament passages, first from a Calvinistic perspective and then also from an Arminian perspective and see the difference in the way that these two schools of thought interpret these key passages.

Let's begin with the doctrine of election from a Calvinistic point of view. Here I would like you to turn to Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, chapter one. We'll just read verses three to six. Ephesians 1:3-6, Paul writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

Let's break down the various features of election as here described.

First, the *source* of our election is God the Father. In verse 3, Paul speaks of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is he who has chosen us. So election has its source in God the Father. He is the one who chooses those to be saved.

Second, the *sphere* in which election takes place is Christ. Paul says in verse 4, “he chose us in him,” that is, in Christ. So election is something that takes place “in Christ.” We are elect insofar as we are in him.

When did this election take place? Well, Paul says God chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world.” So before God ever created the universe, as described in Genesis 1:1, he had already chosen us to be holy and blameless before him and to be his children through Jesus Christ. So from eternity past this decision has already been made. It is not something lately arrived upon by God the Father, but it is an eternal decision that precedes the very foundations of the world, the creation of the universe.

What is the *purpose* of this election? Paul says it is “that we should be holy and blameless before him,” and also to be “his sons through Jesus Christ.” Finally, Paul says it is for God’s glory (in verse 6) “to the praise of his glorious grace.” So the purpose of election is that we might be holy and blameless before God, adopted as his children, to the praise of God’s glory.

What is the *motive* for election? Why did God do this? The motive is love. Paul says that he “destined us in love” to be his sons through Jesus Christ. So election is something that is motivated by God’s love, and it is that love that leads him to elect and save certain persons.

Finally, what is the *basis* of God’s election? It is simply his will. Notice that Paul says he destined us in love “according to the purpose of his will.” It is simply God’s free choice to elect whom he wishes. Therefore, election is unconditional. It is not something that we can merit; it is not something that we can bring about through our actions. This is a decision that was unconditionally made by God according to his free will prior to the creation of the universe, before we ever existed. Look at what Paul says in verses 11-12 of Ephesians 1, “In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.” Notice that God is described as the one who accomplishes *all things* according to the counsel of his will. So the ultimate basis of election is simply God’s sovereign free choice to elect those whom he chooses to salvation.

Let’s now turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans 8:28-30. Here Paul says,

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Notice that, according to this passage, God's predestination is based on his foreknowledge. In verse 29, Paul says "those whom he foreknew" he predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

Now, non-Calvinists will sometimes say that this shows that God looks into the future, so to speak, and sees the free decision of those who would believe in Christ, and seeing how they would freely decide, he then predestines them. But such a view makes predestination look like a sort of fifth wheel – it doesn't really do anything! It doesn't bear any weight. God looks into the future and sees that certain people will freely believe in Christ. But then if they will believe in Christ, there is no need for predestination. They will believe in Christ even "before" God predestines them! So predestination on this view doesn't really do anything. Foreknowledge of our free decisions tells God what is going to happen, and predestination becomes a sort of superfluous exercise on God's part.

But surely there's more to the doctrine of God's predestination than that! That doesn't seem to capture what is involved in God's sovereign election of certain persons. The Calvinist will say that if the object of God's foreknowledge is in fact people's faith, then that faith is itself a sovereign gift of God. God sees that he will bestow saving faith on certain persons, so that what he foresees is, in effect, his own act of bestowing saving faith on those whom he has chosen.

Let's look at some scriptural passages in support of this interpretation. First, John 3:3-8. This is Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus,

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

There's something of a pun here in Jesus' words because the Greek word for "wind" is the same as the word for "spirit." Jesus says the wind blows wherever it wills; you cannot control the wind. You don't know where it comes from; you don't know where it's going. Similarly, he says, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. The Spirit blows upon whom he wills in order to bring about regeneration and new life.

Turn over to John 6:44-45, Jesus says,

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.

Here Jesus ascribes the drawing power of God the Father upon people to bring them to Christ. Apart from this work of God the Father, people will never come to Christ. But if he does draw them, then they will assuredly come to saving faith in Christ.

Look at verse 65 of that same chapter as well. Jesus says, “This is why I told you no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” If God the Father grants that someone should come to Christ, then he assuredly will come; but on the other hand, if it is not granted to someone to come to Christ by the Father, then that person cannot come to Christ. The sovereign decision lies with God the Father.

Look at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 2:8. Here Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” So salvation is not something that you work out yourself. It is from God. He is the one who works it out. That’s why, as Paul goes on to say in verse 9, there is no room for boasting.

Finally, 1 Peter 1:2. The author addresses the exiles of the Jewish dispersion in various places in Asia Minor, whom he describes as “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.” Here all three of the persons of the Trinity are involved. It is God the Father who chooses and destines certain persons. It is the Holy Spirit who sanctifies them for obedience to Jesus Christ.

So, returning to Romans 8:28, even if it is true that God looks into the future and sees people’s faith in Christ and predestines them on that basis, still this faith is itself not a human work. It is not something that any natural man can generate. It is itself the result of God’s effectual work in that person.

Next time we’ll continue our discussion of Calvinism before looking at an Arminian perspective on these same passages. Until that time, may God guide you and bless you throughout the coming week.¹

¹ Total Running Time: 18:01 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 2: Election and Calvinism Continued

Welcome to Defenders! In our discussion of the doctrine of salvation we've been looking at a Calvinistic perspective on the notion of election. We saw that in Romans 8:28, Paul says that "those he [God] foreknew, he predestined." Some Calvinists take this to mean that God looks into the future and he sees the elect on whom he will bestow saving faith, and therefore knowing his own choice to give saving faith to these persons he then predestines them.

Many Calvinists, however, reject the idea that God's foreknowledge in Romans 8:28 has as its object the future decisions of people even if they are totally determined by God. According to these Calvinist theologians, foreknowledge doesn't really mean "to know something in advance," as though God looks into the future and finds out what is going to happen. Rather, "foreknew" is a way of saying that God loved them in advance. To say he foreknew them means that he foreloved them. He picks out certain persons in the future on whom he will set his love. Such foreknowledge is, in effect, to choose certain persons upon whom God will then bestow his love. It doesn't indicate a passive acquisition of information on God's part; rather this is an active bestowal of favor and love upon those persons whom God picks out.

Let's look at a couple of biblical passages where "foreknowledge" seems to be used in this way.

First, Genesis 18:19. Here God is talking about Abraham and God says in verse 19,

. . . I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.

You'll notice that in the translation I read, the verse is rendered "I have chosen him" but the word in Hebrew means literally "I have known him." So when it says, "I knew Abraham," it doesn't just mean "Yes, I know this guy." Rather, it means, "I favored him. I loved Abraham. I picked him out. I chose Abraham." Knowledge here is a much richer concept than just the acquisition of information.

Let's look at a couple of other examples that illustrate this usage. Psalm 1:6 says, "for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." This means much more than that God is aware of or informed about the way of the righteous. For in that same sense, he knows the way of the wicked, right? He is not uninformed about the way of the wicked and what the wicked do. So if this is to distinguish God's knowledge of the way of the righteous from his knowledge of the way of the wicked, it must mean that God favors the way of the righteous. He somehow bestows approval and

personal commitment to the way of the righteous. There is much more here than just the passive acquisition of information about the way the righteous live.

Finally, Jeremiah 1:5. This is a passage about the call of Jeremiah. Look at what God says to Jeremiah in verse 5 of chapter 1. “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Before Jeremiah was even conceived, before he ever existed, God says, “I knew you.” Again, that doesn’t mean just that God had information about him. This is evident from the remainder of the verse: “Before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet.”

So when Romans 8:28 says, “Those whom he foreknew, he also predestined” that means those whom God loved in advance, those whom he had picked out on whom to bestow his favor and his grace. Those persons he predestined. So to interpret Romans 8:28 merely in terms of mere foreknowledge without the sovereign bestowal of God’s love and approval is to have a very thin concept of foreknowledge in this particular verse.

Charles Horn, a Reformed theologian, points out that in Romans 8:28-30 we have a description of God’s eternal counsel, what he does in eternity before the foundations of the world. Then in verses 29-30 we have the actualization of this counsel in the human affairs of life. So, in God’s eternal counsel we have, first, God foreknowledge of whom he would save. Second, there is then God’s predestination. Those whom he foreknew or foreloved, he then predestined. That is to say, he ordained them to salvation. This is God’s eternal counsel. From before the foundations of the world God foreknew and predestined certain persons to salvation.

Then in verses 29-30, we have the actualization of his eternal counsel described. First comes calling. Paul says that those whom he predestined, he also called. At some time in your life, if you have been predestined by God, he will reach out and call you to bring you to himself. This calling is an effectual calling. This is not some sort of mere invitation on God’s part. This is God’s reaching out and grabbing you and bringing you to him. It is what Jesus described as God the Father’s drawing persons to himself. This is the notion of effectual calling. Then comes justification. Those whom he called, he also justified. This is by faith, which is not something that the unregenerate man can muster on his own, since he is spiritually dead and separated from God. Faith is something that God must bestow upon you. So God will justify by faith those whom he has effectually called. Then the final step in salvation is glorification. Those whom he justified, he also glorified.

This process has been called the unbroken chain in God’s process of salvation. Those whom he foreknew, he predestined. Those whom he predestined, he called. Those whom he called, he justified. Those whom he justified, he glorified. There is nowhere along the

line that someone can drop out of this chain and fail to obtain salvation because it is the work of God throughout. His declaration or choice takes place sovereignly in eternity before the foundations of the world; then in human history it is actualized, as God effectually calls, justifies, and finally glorifies those whom he has predestined.

Having explained the Calvinistic scheme of salvation, let's say something more now about the notion of calling, which plays a very critical role in the plan of salvation. The Calvinist typically distinguishes between the *general call* of God (which goes out to every person indiscriminately) and the *special effectual call* of God (which is directed only toward the elect, those who have been chosen by God).

The general call to repentance and faith is issued to all of mankind. Examples of this general call would be found, for example, in John 7:37: "On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink.'" You notice the universal term "anyone" – "if anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink." So this is a general invitation that goes out to all persons. Similarly, in Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." Again, notice the universal quantification. "All" who labor and are heavy-laden are invited to come to Christ. And of course there is Matthew 28:18-19, which is the famous Great Commission given to the disciples,

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Here the disciples are commanded to go out to everyone proclaiming the Gospel. Not just to the elect but to everyone. So this is an illustration of the general call that God issues to mankind to repentance and faith.

However, this general call is not in itself intrinsically efficacious. People can ignore this general call. They can refuse to respond to it and to repent and believe. Therefore, the Calvinist distinguishes a special call of God which is irresistible. This is called "effectual calling." When this sort of a call confronts a person, it is irresistible and will surely produce its effect. Romans 8:30 says, "And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." So this is not just the general call. This is the special effectual calling of the predestined, of the elect. And once God calls them, then he justifies them.

Also turn back to Romans 1:6-7 where the Roman Christians are said to be called in this way. Paul says, "including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints . . ." This is interpreted as an example of effectual calling of these Roman Christians to be saints of God.

Also, 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul says, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” So here again we supposedly have an illustration of this effectual calling to salvation on the part of the Corinthians. Then in verses 26-27 of the same chapter Paul says,

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. . . .

So God has chosen the Corinthians and now he has called them to be saints.

With respect to this special calling of God, Calvinists distinguish between the efficient cause, the moving or motivating cause, and the instrumental cause. The *efficient cause*, that is to say, that which produces the effect, is God himself. It is God who effectually calls the predestined into his Kingdom. Look at Galatians 1:15. Here Paul is reflecting on his own conversion experience. He says, “But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me.” So here he refers to God as the one who had set Paul apart even before he was born, just like Jeremiah, and then at the right time God called him through his grace.

Also 2 Timothy 1:9. Picking up at the end of verse 8, “God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace which he gave us in Christ Jesus ages ago.” So here again the reference is to God. He, in virtue of his own purpose (not because of anything we’ve done), ages ago had set us apart and now he has called us into fellowship with himself.

So the efficient cause of this special effectual calling is God himself directed toward the elect.

The *moving cause*, or that which motivates this calling, is simply God’s will. Look again at 2 Timothy 1:9, “God, who saved us and called us . . . not in virtue of our works but in virtue of his own purpose and the grace . . . he gave us in Christ.” Just as we saw in Ephesians, it is simply God’s will. There isn’t anything about us that makes us special or more lovable that would motivate God to save us. It is simply God’s inscrutable will. He chooses to save those whom he wills and then he calls them.

Then the *instrumental cause*, that is to say the means by which the call goes out, is the Word of God. 2 Thessalonians 2:14, “To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is through the preaching of the Gospel, the Word of God, that people are called.

So through the Gospel as its instrumental cause, God reaches out to the elect (those whom he predestined) and he brings them – he calls them – into his Kingdom and justifies them.

Next time we'll discuss the Calvinistic perspective on regeneration. Until we meet again, may God give you a great week.²

Lecture 3: Regeneration and Arminianism

Welcome to Defenders!

We've been talking about a Calvinistic doctrine of salvation. Last time we discussed the doctrine of effectual calling. Today we want to look at a Calvinist understanding of regeneration. Then we will wrap up our discussion of Calvinism and turn to an Arminian perspective on these same biblical passages and themes.

With respect to regeneration, on a Calvinist view those who have been predestined and effectually called by God, God then regenerates. Regeneration means a quickening, of bringing of spiritual life, being born again where before there was simply spiritual death. God makes people spiritually alive.

In the Calvinistic understanding, regeneration is explanatorily *prior* to the exercise of saving faith. It is not something that God does in response to faith. Indeed, it is actually causally prior to faith. A spiritually dead person cannot exercise saving faith. He is spiritually dead. So, God must first do the work of regenerating him, and then he will be able to place his faith in Christ. Now that does not mean that regeneration and faith happen *chronologically* one after the other – as though in the first moment God regenerates someone and then in the next moment that person places his faith in Christ. It *could* happen like that; but regeneration and faith could also be simultaneous – they could happen at the same moment. At the same moment God regenerates the person, and the person places his faith in Christ. That is why I said it is an explanatory or causal priority that is in play here, not a chronological priority. Even if regeneration and faith occur simultaneously, the faith is the *result* of God's regenerating work. It is not that the person has faith, and so God regenerates him as a result.

If you're not familiar with this idea of explanatory priority, let me give an illustration to try to make it clear. Imagine a chandelier hanging by a chain from the ceiling. The chain is explanatorily prior to the chandelier's hanging there in the air. It isn't that the chandelier is somehow forcing the chain up to the ceiling. It is the chain that is holding up the chandelier – even though they occur simultaneously. It is not as though first there is the chain and then later there is the chandelier. They are simultaneous. But the relation of dependence between them is that the chandelier depends on the chain. It is not that the chain depends on the chandelier. So the chain's being there is explanatorily prior to the chandelier's dangling in the air. If you were to say "Why is the chandelier dangling in the air?" the answer would be "because it is suspended by the chain from the ceiling." In the same way, even if regeneration and faith occur simultaneously in a person's life, the person has faith because God regenerates him. A spiritually dead person cannot exercise saving faith in Christ. So he needs to be regenerated in order to place his faith in Christ.

This is a really interesting view, when you think about it, because what it implies is that salvation is *not* given in response to faith. It is not as though you place your faith in Christ, and so God saves you. What really happens with the elect is that God does a secret work in their hearts – he regenerates them – and so they place their faith in Christ. Faith is the result of being regenerated. Only regenerate people can have saving faith in Christ. An unregenerate, spiritually dead person can't exercise saving faith. So on the Calvinist scheme, even if regeneration and faith occur simultaneously, regeneration explains saving faith.

Saving faith for the Calvinist will involve three elements: knowledge, assent, and trust. First a person will understand what there is to be believed; he will have knowledge of the Gospel. Second, he will assent to it – that is to say, he will give his agreement to it. Then, third, he will trust in what he believes to be true. So genuine, saving faith involves these three elements: knowledge (understanding), assent (agreement), and personal trust (trusting in Christ, trusting in God). This kind of saving faith is something that only a regenerate person can exercise.

Conversion then may come about some time later. The person, having been regenerated, may then begin to read the Bible or to pray or to seek out baptism or to identify as a Christian, and so on. These would be the fruits produced in his life by regeneration. A person who has been regenerated by God will experience a life change that will become evident to others.

So by way of summary we have seen that according to the Calvinist interpretation, God sovereignly decides before the creation of the world which condemned sinners he will bring into a love relationship with himself and predestines those persons to salvation. This is a criterionless choice which has no reason other than God's will. Then as history unfolds, he unilaterally causes those persons to respond to his call to repentance and faith. He regenerates them in order that they then may exercise faith in Christ and so be justified by God.

Having looked at a Calvinist perspective on these issues, we now want to turn to an Arminian perspective on these same passages and themes.

Just as I emphasized that in speaking of Calvinism I wasn't trying to explore John Calvin's own personal views but rather the theology that goes under the name Calvinism; similarly, here we are not looking at Jacob Arminius' particular views on these passages and themes but rather that theology that goes under the name Arminianism.

Let's look first at Ephesians 1:3-14, this time from an Arminian perspective. Paul writes,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in

him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Two points of interpretation need to be emphasized in the Arminian understanding of these verses.

1. *Election is Christocentric.* That is to say, it is in Christ that a person is elect. You find this all the way through this passage. For example, in verse 3 he “has blessed us in Christ.” In verse 4, “he chose us in him.” In verse 7, “in him we have redemption through his blood.” In verse 10, “to unite all things in him.” In verse 11, “in him we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed.” In verse 13, “in him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” So election is Christocentric. It concerns those who are in Christ. Insofar as a person is in Christ he is elected and predestined, as the passage teaches.

2. *Election is primarily corporate in nature, not individual.* That is to say, it is a group or corporate entity that God has elected. Insofar as one is a part of that corporate group or body one shares in its blessings. One who is in Christ is therefore elected and predestined and all the rest.

If you are interested in seeing an Arminian perspective on this passage, I highly recommend this little book by Robert Shank entitled *Elect in the Son*.³ I want to read a couple of passages from this book on the notion of corporate election. The following is from page 45 of *Elect in the Son*. Shank says,

A second aspect of election is implicit in Paul’s Ephesian doxology: the election to salvation is *corporate* as well as Christocentric.

³ Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989).

The corporate nature of election has been noted by many. In his comment on Ephesians 1:4 . . . Lightfoot writes, “The election of Christ involves implicitly the election of the church.” Westcott comments on Ephesians 1:4, “. . . *He chose us* (i.e. Christians as a body v. 3) for Himself out of the world.” Bloomfield comments on Ephesians 1:5, “. . . the Apostle has here no reference to the *personal* election of *individuals*. . . .” Lange comments on Ephesians 1:3,

. . . “us” should be taken in its wider meaning . . . and should not be limited to the Apostle . . . nor to the Jewish Christians, but applies to his people, all men, who have become or will become Christians.

The corporate inference in Lange’s words above is substantiated by his comment on Romans 8:28-30, “. . . Christ is the elect in God’s real kingdom in the absolute sense, so that all His followers are chosen with Him as organic members, according to their organic relations (Eph. i).”

Obviously, the corporate body of the elect is comprised of individuals. But the election is primarily corporate and only secondarily particular. The thesis that election is corporate, as Paul understood it and viewed it in the Ephesian doxology, is supported by the whole context of his epistle:

[What follows now is Shank’s quotation of various phrases from Ephesians that indicate the corporate nature of the election.]

. . . gather together in one all things in Christ . . . the redemption of the purchased possession . . . his inheritance in the saints . . . the church, which is his body . . . who has made us both one . . . to make in himself of twain one new man . . . that he might reconcile both unto God in one body . . . the household of God . . . all the building fitly framed together . . . a holy temple . . . builded together for an habitation of God . . . of the same body . . . the mystery from the beginning of the world [now disclosed in] the church [as fulfillment of] the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord . . . of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named . . . glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages . . . one body . . . the body of Christ . . . the whole body fitly joined together . . . increase of the body . . . we are members of one another . . . Christ is the head of the church . . . the savior of the body . . . Christ loved the church and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church . . . they two shall be one flesh [but] I speak concerning Christ and the church.

So according to Shank, Paul’s conception of election is primarily electing this corporate body or group of people that God calls, justifies, and brings to glory. It is up to

individuals whether or not they want to be a part of that corporate body. How does one become part of that corporate body? Well, through placing one's faith in Christ.

So insofar as one is "in Christ" – that is to say, part of this corporate body – one is elect.

There is one more passage from Shank on page 48 that I would like to read. Here he contrasts Calvin's doctrine of election with the Arminian doctrine. He says,

A central thesis of Calvin's doctrine of election may be stated thus:

The election to salvation is of particular men unconditionally, who comprise the corporate body incidentally.

[By contrast,] a central thesis of the Biblical doctrine of election [that is to say, from the Arminian perspective] may be stated thus:

The election to salvation is corporate and comprehends individual men only in identification and association with the elect body.

So on Shank's view, the object of God's election is this corporate group. That is the primary object of election. Individuals are elect only in a secondary sense insofar as they are part of, or members of, that group and have identified with it and therefore come to share in its blessings.

That would be an Arminian perspective on Ephesians 1. Next time, we will continue our discussion by looking at an Arminian interpretation of Romans 8:28-30. Until then, have a great week.⁴

Lecture 4: Arminianism Continued

Welcome to Defenders. Can you believe that it's been five months now that we've been podcasting Defenders remotely from my home office? We never suspected when we started doing this that it would be so long. But we are so glad that we didn't interrupt the class but have continued to come to you remotely so that we did not have to interrupt our study together. I really enjoy preparing for the class, and I hope that these lessons have been helpful and encouraging to you as well.

We've been talking about the doctrine of salvation from contrasting Calvinistic and Arminian perspectives. Last time we looked at the Arminian understanding of Ephesians 1. We saw that the Arminian interprets election to be Christocentric – to concern everyone who is in Christ. And, secondly, to be corporate in nature. It is primarily this corporate group that is elect, and individuals are elect only secondarily insofar as they are members of that corporate group.

Today we want to turn to a second key passage which is Romans 8:28-30. Paul writes,

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What the Arminian emphasizes is that God's calling here by which he calls people to salvation is not an insincere call. This is a genuine call to which people can respond. God really wants them to respond and be saved.

So in 2 Peter 3:9 we read, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." So God does not want anyone to perish. He wants all to reach repentance. Similarly, in 1 Timothy 2:4, Paul writes God our Savior "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

God genuinely wants all persons to be saved and does not want any to perish. So this call that goes out to people to salvation is a sincere call. Robert Shank, whom I introduced in last week's lesson, describes the Calvinist view by drawing a number of sharp contrasts between what the Scripture affirms and what Calvinism affirms. On page 165 he writes,

Thus the call, addressed by God to all, by design of God is *not* to all, but only to some. The ungodly have [to quote Calvin] "an asylum to which they may betake themselves from the bondage of sin," and they are utterly without excuse for not

doing so – despite the fact that God by immutable decree has rendered them totally unable to do anything other than to “ungratefully reject the offer that is made to them.” When God asks “Why will you die?” the real answer is that God has so ordained. “God so loved the world” that He determined that few shall believe and be saved. “Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth,” cries God to a lost world . . . while making certain that most men do not comply. “Whosoever will, let him come,” pleads the Risen Christ . . . while the Father makes certain that most men will not come. “God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved” . . . but He has effected a “hidden” arrangement ensuring that most of the world *shall not* be saved.

Obviously, Shank is writing here with considerable sarcasm about the Calvinist view, saying that, in effect, the call to repentance and salvation on the Calvinist view is a sham. It is an insincere call because even though God issues this universal call, He himself wills that not all respond to it and does not give his saving grace to people to enable them to respond to it.

With regard to Romans 8:28-30, Shank distinguishes between election and predestination. Election is the corporate calling, the calling out of a people or a body (the church). Election is a corporate notion. Predestination, by contrast, he sees as the foreordination of the elect to conformity to the image of Christ. So anyone who is a part of that elect body is predestined to be conformed to Christ’s image. That’s what Paul means when he says, “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

To give my own illustration, suppose I were to announce, “We’re going to be leading a tour of Israel next year.” Anyone who wants to can sign up for the tour and join us on the trip. Those who go are guaranteed to see the Sea of Galilee, to walk the walls of Jerusalem, to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and so on, because that is what is planned. That would not guarantee who is actually in the group and goes on the tour.

Similarly, here God has predestined and ordained that a certain group of people, namely, the church, will be justified, sanctified, and glorified, but that doesn’t guarantee who is in the group. So predestination is not the same as election. Election is the corporate calling, and predestination is God’s ordaining that those who are members of that elect body will be conformed to the image of Christ, will be sanctified, justified, and eventually glorified.

Let’s turn now to how the Arminian understands faith. For the Arminian, faith is not something that is bestowed upon us by God independent of our own free decision to believe in Christ. The Arminian recognizes God’s sovereign choice to save sinners. In Romans 9:18, Paul writes, “So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he

hardens the heart of whomever he wills.” It is God’s discretion whom he shall save and whom he shall pass over. It is up to God. In verses 22-24 Paul explains who it is, then, that God has chosen to have mercy upon. He writes,

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

So God, in his sovereignty, has chosen to elect for himself not simply Jewish people but Gentile peoples as well. No Jewish person can gainsay God’s decision in this matter because God is sovereign. He has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he has chosen to save Gentiles as well as Jews. So then, in verses 30-31, Paul says,

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling that law.

It is through faith that one comes to be a part of that elect body. God has sovereignly chosen to save all who have faith in Christ Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. This is his sovereign choice. Similarly, over in Galatians 3:6-9, Paul writes,

Thus Abraham “believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith.

Faith is the key factor in determining whether one is a part of that elect body of persons that God has chosen. It is faith which qualifies you to be a son of Abraham and an heir to God’s promises.

Finally, back to Romans again: Romans 10:12-13:

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

So faith is the distinguishing factor between who is elect and who is not elect. It doesn’t matter whether you are Jew or Gentile. All who have faith in Christ Jesus will be saved.

The Arminian, in contrast to the Calvinist, regards God’s grace, which is freely offered to all, as resistible. Look, for example, at Acts 7:51. This is Stephen’s statement just before his stoning. In verse 51 of chapter 7 he says to the people around him, “You stiff-necked

people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.” So grace is not irresistible; it can be resisted. God’s saving grace is freely offered to all persons, and those who respond with faith will be part of that elect group of people, and so foreordained to share in its blessings. But this is not an irresistible, unilateral work of God. This is a work that requires a free human response.

That completes my exposition of an Arminian understanding of the doctrine of salvation. Next time we’ll turn to an evaluation of these two competing views. Until then, may God guide you throughout this coming week.⁵

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Lecture 5: Evaluation of Calvinism and Arminianism

Over the past few weeks we've been looking at the doctrine of salvation from the perspectives of Calvinism and Arminianism. Today we want to come to some evaluation of these competing views.

It seems to me that the Arminian notion of corporate election does make good sense of many of the biblical passages that we surveyed, particularly Romans 9 and 10. As I've previously explained, it seems to me that Paul's burden in Romans 9 is to emphasize that it is up to God whom he will save and whom he will damn and that Paul wants to broaden out the scope of God's salvation as wide as possible to include the Gentiles as well as the Jews. So God has decided to save all who place their faith in Christ Jesus regardless of their ethnic origin. That is why in chapter 10 Paul can say, "Therefore everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" – a statement that would be impossible on a Calvinistic interpretation because only those who are elect and are effectually and irresistibly called can be saved. So the view of corporate election, I think, makes very good sense out of Romans 9 and 10 as well as the many corporate metaphors that Paul uses in his epistles such as the body of Christ, the church, the olive tree with branches broken off and grafted in, and so forth.

Having said that, however, I do not think that corporate election is the whole story. I say this on the basis of passages like Acts 13:48. Here Luke is describing the response to the apostles' preaching, and he says, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." What a remarkable statement that is. "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." That can't plausibly be construed corporately. He is talking there about individual people who responded to the preaching of the Gospel. As many as were ordained to eternal life believed in the Gospel.

The verb here is the past-perfect of the Greek word *tasso* which means "to appoint" or "to designate" or "to set aside." It indicates that those whom God has set aside or appointed or designated to salvation or eternal life will be saved. The Arminian attempts to interpret this passage by saying that what it means is as many as were disposed to eternal life believed. So if you had the disposition toward eternal life, then you believed in the Gospel. Therefore, it was of your own free will.

But I'm not persuaded that this is a plausible interpretation of this passage. Let me give two reasons why I think that that is incorrect. First, the verb here is in the passive voice. That indicates that God is the subject. The use of the passive voice is indicative that God is the active subject of the verb. That is to say, it concerns all of those whom God had ordained to eternal life. Second, the context of the theology of the book of Acts as a

whole doesn't sit very well, I think, with the Arminian interpretation. The context of the book of Acts shows that Luke believes that people are foreordained to eternal life as individuals. Look, for example, at Acts 4:24-28. Here the early church is at prayer and Luke records,

And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said,
“Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit,

‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth set themselves in array,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place.

Isn't that remarkable? Herod and Pilate are named as individuals along with the people of Jerusalem and the Gentiles, to do whatever God's hand and plan had foreordained to happen. The expression in the Greek here is *hosa hē cheir sou kai hē boulē proōrisen*. *Proōrisen* means “to ordain something in advance.” Whatever your will foreordained to happen is what took place in Jerusalem.

Also, take a look at Acts 2:23 for a similar statement. Here Peter says, “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” Notice here he speaks of the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, which included the crucifixion of Jesus. The Greek here is *tē hōrismenē boulē* (that is to say, “your foreordained will”). It's from the same Greek word as *proōrisen*. The foreordained will and (and then here comes the word for foreknowledge) *prognōsei tou theou*. The foreknowledge of God. So the foreordained will and the foreknowledge of God. This is what the individuals named carried out.

Compare with this Galatians 1:15. Here Paul is talking about his own call. He says, “But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me,” etc., etc. Here the word in the Greek is *aphorisas* which means “to set apart” or “to put aside.” He says that God had set him aside even before he was born, clearly as an individual. We are not talking corporate election here.

Finally, go back to the book of Acts again, chapter 9, verse 15. It also speaks about God's call of the apostle Paul. Here the Lord says to Ananias, "Go, for he [that is, Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." The Greek phrase here is *skeuos eklogēs* which means "a chosen vessel" or "an instrument" that God has chosen to use.

So both Paul and Luke think of Paul himself as someone set apart by God, a chosen instrument or vessel that God then called at the appropriate time. Again, this cannot be thought of as primarily corporate.

On the other hand, Paul apparently did not feel that this call that came to him was irresistible or inevitable. In Acts 26:19 in his testimony to King Agrippa, Paul says, "Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus," etc., etc. So even though Paul felt that God had set him apart as an individual before he was born and then called him at the right time – he was a chosen instrument – Paul didn't seem to think that this was something that was irresistible or inevitable. Rather, he said "*I wasn't disobedient. I obeyed what the heavenly vision told me to do, and I did exactly as instructed.*"

So on the one hand we have the affirmation of the sovereignty of God that does seem to extend to individuals. Yet, at the same time, we have the affirmation of human freedom that one is able to resist what God has planned and ordained.

How are we to best put these together? Well, as some of you might surmise, I think that the best way to understand these passages is through divine middle knowledge. This is the Molinist view of divine providence as enunciated by the Jesuit Counter-Reformer Luis Molina (1535-1600). According to Molina, God knows how every possible person he might create would freely respond in any set of circumstances that God might place him in. This provides the key to God's providence, just as it is stated in the book of Acts. What happens is according to the foreknowledge and plan of God. God knew how Pilate and Herod would freely respond if in positions of authority in first century Judea. He knew how the Jews in the city of Jerusalem would freely behave in those circumstances, and how the Gentiles would behave. So God's detailed plan unfolds according to God's foreknowledge, understood here to encompass middle knowledge.

For Molina, the circumstances in which God places people include various gifts of grace and workings of the Holy Spirit to bring people to salvation. God knows whether or not a person would freely respond to his grace in any set of circumstances that he might place that individual in. So, for example, he knew that if he were to appear to Saul of Tarsus as he was journeying to Damascus to persecute Christians, then Saul would freely obey the heavenly vision and become a Christ follower. Therefore, he chose to appear to Saul in this way, not robbing Saul of his freedom, but knowing how Saul would freely respond in

such a circumstance. So God knows which people to create and what circumstances to place them in in order to bring about the salvation of those people. In Acts 17:26-27 we have Paul's address to the Areopagus in Athens. He says,

And he made from one [man] every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us.

Here Paul says that God has determined the exact times and places that every human being should live in the world with a view toward achieving their salvation. So even before the foundation of the world, God knew which people would freely respond to his grace and be saved and who would reject it. Therefore, he knew exactly the people who had been chosen and set apart to be saved. That is what it says in Romans 8:29, that those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

Molina also believed that God provides sufficient grace for salvation to every person that he creates. God's will for human salvation is truly universal. God wants everyone to be saved, and so he bestows grace upon every person that is sufficient for salvation.

Now, what should we say about Molina's belief in this regard? Does God really in fact want all persons to be saved as Molina believed? Well, I think there are a couple of options here. One of the options is a form of Molinism that is called Congruism. This school of thought says that there is congruent grace for any given individual. That is to say, God knows for any individual person just what gifts of grace would be met with a free, affirmative response by that person. He knows just what circumstances to place that person in in such a way that that person would freely respond to his grace and be saved. If that is the case, we may wonder, if God knows the circumstances under which any possible person would be freely saved, then why isn't everybody saved? Well, the Congruist could say it is because there is no feasible world available to God in which all of those circumstances are compossible – that is to say, the circumstances may not be able to be cobbled together in such a way that everyone would be saved. It may well be the case that in every world of free creatures that is feasible for God some people would freely reject his grace and be lost. So, although there are *possible* worlds in which everyone is freely saved, it may well be the case that there are no *feasible* worlds available to God in which there is universal salvation.

Or, here's a second alternative. The Molinist could say that God does not in fact want all persons to be saved but prefers a world in which not all are saved, even though he could have chosen to create such a world. He has simply chosen not to create a world in which everybody is freely saved. This view gets you as close to Calvinism as the Calvinist could possibly go, and yet it still affirms libertarian free will. It is to say that God could have

elected to save all persons, but he has chosen to create a world in which he knew some would freely reject him. Why would he choose such a world? Well, let the Calvinist answer that – maybe to bring greater glory to himself somehow by showing his justice or something. I don't know. But the point is that this view will get you everything that the Calvinist wants to have, but it will not annihilate human freedom.

So there are a couple of options here that are available in answer to the question as to why God's universal salvific will is not achieved. Either way, it seems to me that a middle knowledge perspective supplements what we've already seen with regard to corporate election by showing how people can be predestined and foreordained as individuals and yet it is still fully compatible with human freedom. Therefore a Molinist perspective enjoys a considerable advantage.

Next week we'll turn to the topic of our mystical union with Christ.⁶

⁶ Total Running Time: 20:34 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 6: The Mystical Union of the Believer with Christ

Today we are going to start a new subsection on the doctrine of salvation on our *mystical union* with Christ. I think that this lesson will be a real encouragement to every regenerate believer.

In speaking of our mystical union with Christ we are not talking about the total absorption of the believer into deity such as you have in pantheistic religions, for example, Bhuddism, where at death like a drop of water returning to the ocean so the individual returns to The All or The Totality of Being, and as a result really ceases to exist as an individual thing. We are not talking about that sort of mystical union such as you find in pantheism.

Rather, what we are talking about is the wonder of a personal relationship and identification of the regenerate believer with Jesus Christ. It is rather like the marriage relationship that Paul describes in Ephesians 5 where he says that the man and the woman become one flesh. Yet, they still exist as two individual persons. It is not as though they somehow merge into one person. They are two distinct persons, but they are so closely united that they become identified with one another as a unit.

I think that the notion of our union with Christ is the primary meaning of the popular phrase “having a personal relationship with God.” When we say that in coming to know Christ you come into a personal relationship with God, we are not speaking primarily of the subjective experience of fellowship with God. Some people who don’t have that sort of intimate fellowship with God or who have their Christian experience come and go as emotions wax and wane or as times change will sometimes say, “Where is this personal relationship with God that I am supposed to have as a Christian?” What they fail to understand, I think, is that this personal relationship with God is not primarily a subjective experience. It is primarily an objective relationship into which you have come and in which you stand whereby you are identified with Christ regardless of the shifting sands of experience and emotion. It is primarily an objective reality, not a subjective experience.

Let’s turn to look at the biblical data concerning the mystical union with Christ. In both the Gospels and in Paul’s epistles we have a great deal of discussion of salvation’s consisting in our union with Christ.

Let’s look first at the data of the Gospels. Let’s turn to the Gospel of John 15:1-8. Here Jesus gives his parable of the vine and its branches. He says,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

Here Jesus describes the relationship between himself and his disciples as being like the relationship between a vine and its branches. There is a deep union between the two. He says “abide in me and I in you.” It is the person who is abiding in Christ and in whom Christ is abiding who is united with and identified with Christ and therefore is a fruitful disciple of Christ. So in the parable of the vine and the branches we have an illustration of this close union that the believer has with Christ. Not a union that obliterates our individuality but one that unites us intimately with Christ and he with us so that we become fruitful.

Another example is in John 17:20-23. This is the high priestly prayer of Jesus for the disciples.

I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.

Now, many times this passage is appealed to as teaching the unity of the church. Christ is praying that his followers would be so united, so unified, that the world would see that they are indeed followers of Jesus. But even more fundamentally, this is a prayer for unity of the believer with God the Father and God the Son. Verse 21 says, “that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us.” So the fundamental union here is not the union among believers, horizontally so to speak, rather it is that vertical union of the believer with God the Father and God the Son. As the Father is in the Son and the Son is in us, we are then in God the Father and in God the

Son. There is a unity between the believer and the Godhead that comes through knowing Christ.

Finally, Luke 10:16. Jesus tells his disciples, “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me.” Here again you see the unity of the believer with Jesus and then of Jesus with the Father. So the person who rejects the preaching of the disciples is said to reject Christ. It is not just the disciples that he rejects; he rejects Christ because Christ is so intimately united with his disciples. And he who rejects Christ rejects God because God is so intimately one with Christ. So in this passage as well we see the mystical union of the believer with Christ and the Father, as we are identified with Christ and personally related to him.

In the Gospels, there are many different examples of this sort of union. For example, in the Gospels Jesus says, “I am the light of the world.” But then he also says to the disciples, “You are the light of the world.” They are the light of the world insofar as they are united with Christ who is the light of the world.⁷ So as a result they also can be said to be the light of the world. We’ve already seen the parable of the vine and its branches. The vine isn’t something that is distinct from or devoid of the branches. The branches are part of the vine. They are unified and identified with the vine. Also, as in the example from Luke 10: how people treat Christians is how they treat Christ. So Jesus says that even someone “who gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in my name gives it unto me.” He gives it to Christ insofar as he ministers to Christ’s children. So there are various examples in the Gospels of this close identification of the believer with Jesus Christ as we abide in Christ and he abides in us.

Let’s turn now to look at some of the data from Paul’s letters. In the Pauline epistles, this notion of the believer’s union with Christ becomes a central theme. Paul uses the expression “in Christ” or “in Christ Jesus” 164 times in his epistles. It is a marvelous Bible study to look up all that we have “in Christ” according to Paul. Insofar as we are in Christ we are heirs to an incredible number of blessings and privileges. Let me just look at a few of these this morning and then next week we’ll continue our examination of Paul’s letters.

1. *In Christ we are chosen.* Ephesians 1:4, Paul says, “even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” So in Christ we are chosen.

2. *In Christ we are called.* 1 Corinthians 7:22, Paul says, “For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a

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cf. John 8:12; Matthew 5:14-16

slave of Christ.” Calling, regardless of your circumstances, is said to be in the Lord or in Christ. Insofar as you are in Christ you are called.

3. *We are foreordained or predestined in Christ.* Ephesians 1:11-12,

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined [or foreordained] and appointed to live for the praise of his glory.” So we are predestined or foreordained in Christ.

4. *We are created for good works in Christ.* Ephesians 2:10,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

5. *In Christ we are sealed.* Ephesians 1:13-14,

In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

We are sealed with the Holy Spirit for the day at which we inherit our eternal estate.

6. *In Christ we are justified.* Galatians 2:17. Paul is speaking here of our being justified by our faith in Christ rather than by works of the law, and he says, “But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not!” The phrase I want to focus on here is that phrase “justified in Christ.” It is in Christ that we have justification.

7. Similarly, *as we are in Christ, we are sanctified.* 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul says,

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

Again, the key phrase in this verse is “sanctified in Christ Jesus.”

8. *We are crucified with Christ.* Romans 6:1-11,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be

enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Here Paul explains that it is in Christ that we are crucified with Christ. We are united with him in his death in dying to our old sin nature so that we might live in resurrection life, a sanctified life pleasing to God.

We will continue with Paul's list next time. But just to summarize, look at already what we've seen concerning the blessings that the regenerate believer has insofar as we are in Christ. In Christ we are chosen, called, foreordained, created to good works, sealed with the Holy Spirit, justified, sanctified, co-crucified, and risen with Christ. There is more to come, and we'll look at that next week. In the meantime, may God guide and bless you.⁸

Lecture 7: The Mystical Union with Christ - Continued

We've been talking about the mystical union between Jesus Christ and his church – between the individual, regenerate believer and Christ. Last time we saw that the expression “in Christ” or “in him” is one of Paul’s favorites; some 164 times in his epistles Paul uses this expression to describe all that we are and have in Christ. We saw last time that in Christ we are chosen, called, foreordained or predestined, created to good works, sealed by the Holy Spirit, justified, sanctified, and co-crucified with Christ.

Today, let's continue that list by looking at some of the other blessings that we have insofar as we are united with Christ.

9. *We have adoption as sons and heirs of God.* Galatians 3:16, 26, 29. Paul says,

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many; but, referring to one, “And to your offspring,” which is Christ.

In other words, Paul says this promise is primarily to Abraham’s singular offspring Jesus Christ.

. . . for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

So the promise is primarily to Abraham’s offspring which Paul says is Christ, but insofar as we are united with Christ, we also are Abraham’s offspring and therefore heirs of this promise of God made to Abraham and to his offspring. This is a wonderful illustration of the union that we have with Christ and, in virtue of that union, our sharing in a promise made, according to Paul, first and foremost to Jesus Christ.

10. *We are one body in Christ.* Galatians 3:28, the verse that I just skipped. Paul says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” All ethnic and gender and other barriers to unity are dissolved in Christ. We are one body in Christ. Though we certainly have our differences, nevertheless there is this deeper commonality that we all share in virtue of being members of the one body of Christ.

11. *In Christ we have redemption.* Romans 3:24. Paul says, “They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” So insofar as we are in Christ, we have redemption from our sins. We are freed from our sins and no longer liable to punishment for them.

12. Similarly, *in Christ we have eternal life*. That is stated in Romans 6:23. Paul says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So for those who are in Christ we have eternal life.

13. *We have forgiveness in Christ*. Ephesians 1:7: “In him [that is, in Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses . . .” So we have a divine pardon of our sins in Christ.

14. *As we are in Christ we are a new creation*. 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes, “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” When a person is in Christ, the old life – the old self – is done away with. Our guilt is wiped out, our death sentence of sin is abolished, and we are given a new status as adopted children, heirs of God, and citizens of a heavenly kingdom. We thus become new creations insofar as we are in Christ and united with him.

15. *In Christ we have liberty*. Galatians 2:4. Here Paul is speaking of Judaizers who were threatening the freedom of the Gospel by forcing Gentile converts to submit to Jewish law. Paul says, “. . . because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage . . .” and then the sentence continues. These Judaizers wanted to deny the liberty which Christians enjoy from all of the demands of the Jewish law, such as circumcision, food laws, and so on and so forth. Instead, Paul says in Christ we have freedom. We have liberty from all of the demands of the law.

16. *In summary, we have every spiritual blessing in Christ*. Ephesians 1:3 says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” So, insofar as we are united with Christ, we enjoy a multitude of spiritual blessings in virtue of being united with him.

17. The last blessing that I want to mention is that *as we are in Christ, we always have triumph*. In 2 Corinthians 2:14, Paul says, “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.” This doesn’t mean that our lives are going to be hassle-free and that we won’t be subject to failure and defeat and hardships in earthly things. Keep in mind that that sentence was, after all, written by a man who suffered enormous adversity because of his commitment to Christ and who was finally martyred for his faith. Yet, Paul is able to say, “Christ always leads us in triumph.” He is assuring us that insofar as we are abiding in Christ and walking in his will, even the adversities and the defeats and the failures of life ultimately redound to the purpose of the triumph of God’s Kingdom. So he can say “through us he spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere.” That, I think, is a tremendous comfort and encouragement as we go through the ups and downs of life. And in hardship and failure, even in those valleys, we know that if we are abiding

in Christ nevertheless we have triumph in him insofar as we follow his will and his leading.

To sum up, just look at all the things that Paul says we have in Christ. In Christ we are chosen, called, predestined, created to good works, sealed with the Holy Spirit, justified, sanctified, co-crucified with Christ, have redemption from our sins, have eternal life, have forgiveness, are a new creation in Christ, are set at liberty, have all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places, and are always led in triumph. What a tremendous encouragement this is for us as Christians as we contemplate all that we are and have in Christ.

Next time we will look at a couple of important metaphors used in the New Testament to characterize our mystical union with Christ. Until then, may God lead you this week in triumph as you seek to know and to serve him.⁹

⁹ Total Running Time: 12:08 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 8: Metaphors for Mystical Union

We are going to continue our discussion of the mystical union of Christ and his church and examine a couple of New Testament metaphors that are used to express the union that we have with Christ.

The first of these is the relationship between a bride and a groom, or a husband and a wife. As they are united in marriage, they are a symbol of the union of Christ and his church. Paul explains this in Ephesians 5:21-35. Paul writes,

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Now, this verse in the original context in Genesis referred to the union of the man and his wife in sexual intercourse as they become one flesh in the conjugal act of marriage. But Paul says, in a deeper sense, this verse refers to the union between Christ and his church. The man and the wife become one flesh, and this is a symbol or representation of the intimate, personal union of Christ with his church. So the marriage relationship is a living parable, as it were, of the mystical union that is the subject of this lesson. That is why, I think, the marriage relationship is so sacred to God and must not be violated. This is why adultery or homosexual activity is so abhorrent to God. Because it is a profaning of this symbol of the union of Christ and his church.

A good example of the sacredness of our union with Christ is found in 1 Corinthians 6:15-20. Here Paul talks about the importance of chastity in the marriage relationship as well as for those who are single. In verse 15 of 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says,

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? [Notice the union that we have with Christ. Your bodies are members of Christ.] Shall I therefore take

the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two shall become one flesh." But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

We see here in Paul's commands for observing chastity, both within marriage as well as for single people, the importance of our union with Christ and not allowing that to be profaned in any way by making the members of Christ illicitly members of some physical union other than the union between a man and his wife. So the marriage relationship is a living picture of the mystical union. It is no wonder that our Catholic friends see marriage as a sacrament. You can see why it would be regarded in that way in the sense that it pictures the union between Christ and his church.

The second metaphor that we find in the New Testament that also expresses the intimate union of the believer with Christ – one which we've already alluded to – is the body with its many members or parts. The way in which the many parts of the body are not independent of one another but rather go to make up one living, functioning organism illustrates our union with Christ.

Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. He writes,

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater

modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

So, as Christians, we are members of Christ's body. Just as the body has all of these interdependent parts that function for the whole and each of which is important for the proper functioning of the body, so we, too, make up this one body in Christ and need to care for one another in order that the body of Christ may not be impaired.

Paul also speaks to this analogy in his epistle to the Ephesians 3:4-6. He writes,

When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

This is what we saw in Romans 9, you'll remember, that God has sovereignly elected to save all those who place their faith in Christ Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. Now the Gentiles are also members of the same body with Jewish believers and therefore partakers of the promises in Christ Jesus because they, too, are united with him in Christ.

Then in chapter 4 verses 4-16 Paul goes on to extend this analogy. He says,

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is he who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather,

speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

Here, now, Christ is said to be the head of this body of which we are the members. As we are in him, submitted to him, and exercising our spiritual gifts in the context of the local church, then the body of Christ locally will be healthy and will build itself up and will grow into maturity. Notice that maturity in Christ is characterized by a stability that is not buffeted and carried about by every wind of doctrine. That emphasizes the importance of a class like Defenders – learning Christian doctrine as part of maturity in Christ.

In the analogy of the body with its many members, we have another symbol of our union with Christ and the importance of exercising our spiritual gift in the context of the body to build up the body of Christ.

So in both the marriage union between a man and his wife and in the body of Christ, headed by Christ himself, we have important New Testament metaphors of our mystical union with Christ.

Next time we'll look at some relationship between the mystical union and salvation and draw some application of this union to our personal lives. Until then may God bless you until we meet again.¹⁰

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Lecture 9: Application of Mystical Union to Our Lives

We want to wrap up our discussion of the mystical union. I'd like to say a word, first, about the relation of mystical union to justification. Our mystical union with Christ plays a crucial role in the atonement theory of the great Swiss Reformed theologian François Turretin (1623-1687). For Turretin our sins are imputed to Christ and his righteousness is imputed to us in virtue of our mystical union with Christ. He writes,

the curse and punishment of sin which he received upon himself in our stead secures to us blessing and righteousness with God in virtue of that most strict union between us and him by which, as our sins are imputed to him, so in turn his obedience and righteousness are imputed to us.

So our mystical union with Christ is the basis of the imputation of our sins to Christ and his righteousness to us. According to Turretin, as long as we remain outside of Christ and Christ remains outside of us then we can receive no benefit from his atoning death. But God has united us with Christ in a twofold way, first naturally (namely, by means of the incarnation we and Christ share a common human nature), and second, mystically (namely, our communion with Christ by grace). In virtue of our union with him we share in the benefits of his atoning death. Turretin writes, "Having been made by God a surety for us and given to us for a head, he can communicate to us his righteousness and all of his benefits." Our union with Christ, he says, is the "cause and foundation" of our sharing in all his benefits, including justification (which consists in the remission of sins and our adoption as sons).

So in Turretin's view the imputation of righteousness is explanatorily prior to the remission of our sins. In virtue of our union with Christ, his righteousness is imputed to us. The imputation of his righteousness to us brings two benefits: the remission of sins and the right to life (which is exactly what justification consists of). If we wish to philosophize correctly, Turretin advises, we must not say that God first remits our sins and afterwards imputes Christ's righteousness to us; rather God first imputes Christ's righteousness to us and afterwards on account of that imputed righteousness remits our sins.

Thus, Turretin's atonement theory has a peculiar explanatory structure: first, we through faith are united with Christ as our head; next, in virtue of our union with Christ, his righteousness is imputed to us; finally, in virtue of his imputed righteousness, our sins are remitted and we are given the right to life, adoption as sons.

Although theologians often appeal to our mystical union with Christ to explain the efficacy of his atonement, such an account seems to be viciously circular. The problem is that only persons who are regenerate and justified share a mystical union with Christ. It is

impossible for an unregenerate and unjustified person to be in Christ. So there is a vicious explanatory circle in Turretin's view: in order to be in mystical union with Christ we must first be justified, but in order to be justified we must first be in mystical union with Christ. Even if our mystical union with Christ is simultaneous with our justification, justification needs to be explanatorily prior to our mystical union and not vice versa.

Let me give an analogy in order to make this explanatory priority clear. Think of the state of being in bankruptcy. Being in bankruptcy does not mean just being in over your head financially. Rather bankruptcy is a legal status for which a company must apply. If a company is legally in bankruptcy, then all its debts are absolved and it is freed from all its obligations and can start a new life. In order for a company to be in bankruptcy, there must be a court order which legally gives the company this status. Now obviously, the court order is explanatorily prior to the company's being in bankruptcy even if they are simultaneous. It is in virtue of the legal declaration of the court that you are in bankruptcy; the court does not issue its declaration in virtue of your being in bankruptcy.

Now analogously, our being in Christ is a kind of legal status which we receive in virtue of God's declaring us to be righteous. It is because of our legal justification by God that we are in Christ. So our mystical union with Christ is not the foundation of our justification; rather our justification is the foundation of our mystical union with Christ.

Were I to teach this section over again, I would have discussed mystical union after regeneration and justification rather than before, as we're doing. For regeneration and justification are explanatorily prior to our mystical union with Christ.

Finally, let me say a few words of practical application of the doctrine of mystical union for our lives. I think all of this is very nicely summarized by Paul in Galatians 2:20. Paul says,

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

I want to read that statement one more time and let you reflect on it by asking yourself: can you put your name in there in the place of "I" and "me"?

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This expresses the union between Christ and the believer so intimately that here Christ is described as living out his life through us as we abide in him and he abides in us.

This doctrine of the mystical union of the believer with Christ, I think, is tremendously encouraging.

1. It is a source of strength as we go through the adversities and trials of life. As we abide in Christ and he abides in us, we are like the branches of that vine which draw their life from the vine. As long as we are abiding in Christ we can be drawing upon that supernatural strength which is given to us through the indwelling Holy Spirit to get through the trials and adversities of life.

2. We've seen that it is a call to holy living. As we are united with Christ we are called to live out the holiness and sanctification that we properly have in Christ. In Christ, we are redeemed, forgiven, cleansed, we are a new creation in him, and we need now to live that out and to live holy lives separated from sin and do nothing that would profane that sacred union that we have with Christ.

3. It is a summons to closer fellowship with Christ. Insofar as we are in Christ, our union with him is not, as I said, something that is dependent upon our emotional experience day to day. Our subjective experience will rise and fall, will wax and wane. And our union with Christ isn't dependent upon that emotional experience. Nevertheless, insofar as Christ lives within us and we abide in him, I think this is a summons to work out in our experience what we really are in Christ and to draw close to him in prayer, in study of his Word, in fellowship, in worship, and so forth as we try to actualize in our experience what we actually are in Christ.

4. It is a source of security for us as believers. Insofar as we abide in Christ and he in us, we are eternally secure. We are redeemed, we are sealed, we are a new creation, justified, sanctified, and all the rest. So this is a call to stay close to Christ because that is where our security lies. For the believer who is abiding in Christ, nothing can snatch him out of the Lord's hand.

I hope that you have been encouraged by this study of the doctrine of salvation. I think it is a tremendous encouragement to us as we reflect on all of these blessings that we have in Christ and then to live our lives accordingly.

Next time we'll take up a study of the doctrine of regeneration, another important subsection of the locus doctrine of salvation.¹¹

¹¹ Total Running Time: 14:28 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 10: Regeneration / New Birth

Today we begin a new subsection in our discussion of the doctrine of salvation on regeneration or the new birth. What do we mean when we talk about regeneration or being born again? “Regeneration” can be defined as *the act of the Holy Spirit whereby one becomes spiritually alive and a child of God.*

The new birth is mentioned in the New Testament in a couple of places. For example, John 1:12-13 is an important passage. John says,

But to all who received him [that is, Christ], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Here John refers to that supernatural birth whereby one becomes God’s child.

And as you’re probably aware, over in John 3 we have a long discourse on the new birth between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Let’s turn to John 3 and read John 3:1ff.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can this be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

Here Jesus describes to Nicodemus a birth that is not fleshly but rather spiritual, wrought by the Holy Spirit and in virtue of which one comes into the Kingdom of God. Indeed, Jesus says you cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless you have this spiritual new birth.

The theological term for the new birth is *regeneration*. It means literally to be born again; not generated once but regenerated – reborn. So the definition of “regeneration,” then, is an act of the Holy Spirit whereby a person becomes spiritual alive and a child of God. Based on what we have seen in previous lessons, it is evident that regeneration actualizes our mystical union with Christ.

How can we characterize this new birth or regeneration that is wrought by the Holy Spirit?

1. *In virtue of the new birth, you become a new creation.* In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul writes, “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” So insofar as we are united with Christ through the new birth, through regeneration, we become a new creation. That doesn’t mean that you are no longer the same person that you were prior to your rebirth. You are the same person in terms of numerical identity. That is why you can say, “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” It is the same person but that person was once unregenerate and now has become regenerate in light of his new birth. Therefore, everything is new for that person. The slate has been wiped clean. Your guilt has been expiated. Your sins have been forgiven. You are freed from them. You start over. You have a new life. So this is a tremendous truth that Christians should relish and rejoice in. It is not just that God has forgiven you but that everything starts over for you. Recall all the benefits and new status you have in virtue of being in Christ! Now you begin to write a new chapter of your life. So when you are born again, you are more than just an unregenerate person and now a regenerate person; rather everything starts over and you become a new creation in Christ.

2. *Rebirth involves an immediate relationship with Christ and with God.* In 1 Peter 1:3-5, Peter says,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Here Peter says that it is by God’s mercy that we have been born anew into this living hope in which we stand and to the inheritance in heaven that we have waiting for us. So when we are born again by the Holy Spirit, we are placed into a new relationship with God which gives us a vital hope for the future that extends beyond the grave.

3. *This relationship is eternal.* Notice what Peter says about it. “You have been born anew to a living hope and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading.” Then he says you will be kept by God’s power until you take hold of this inheritance which is reserved for you in heaven. This is not a relationship that is temporary. Nor is it

one that begins when you die. It begins right now. You have been born anew, you are a new creation, and you now enjoy this relationship with God that will last forever.

If we go back to the Gospel of John, look at John 3:16 – the sentence just following the passage we just read – John goes on to comment, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” So as a result of the new birth, you are brought into a relationship with God which gives you everlasting life.

4. As a new creation, in this new relationship with God, *we have freedom from sin*. 1 John 1:7-9, John says,

. . . if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So as we abide in Christ, we have access to God’s forgiveness. God doesn’t simply forgive all of our past sins, rather as we walk in the light – as we walk with him – when we do stumble, we can come to God in confession, and he is faithful and will forgive our sins and cleanse us.

Now some people say that when you become a Christian, God forgives not only your past sins, and your present sins, but also your future sins. I realize that this is very frequently said on a popular level, but if you think about it it is rather strange – how can a sin be forgiven that you have not committed? – unless you are a tenseless time theorist – right? – and you believe that you are somehow out there in the future and committing those sins. But if you think that temporal becoming is real and the future is unreal, then it doesn’t exist, and so there aren’t any such sins. Certainly we all want to affirm that God foreknows the sins that you will commit. That is certainly true. But can you be guilty of a sin that you haven’t committed? Granted, you are going to commit it. Then you will be guilty once you commit it. We agree on that. But can I actually be guilty for something I haven’t done? That is hard to see. And if I’m not guilty of it, then how could I be forgiven for it? I think that what people are trying to express here is that Christ’s death is sufficient to cover all your sins past, present, and future. His atoning death is a sufficient sacrifice to cover every sin. That’s why when you commit more sins or new sins there doesn’t need to be an additional sacrifice. You don’t need to have Christ die again or offer something else. The one sacrifice is good for all of these sins for all time. But it does seem to me that John is saying that we need to appropriate that sacrificial death by coming to God, confessing our sins, and asking him to forgive us when we commit them. So I think that Christ’s atoning death is sufficient to cover every sin past, present, and

future, but that doesn't mean that when I come to Christ I am forgiven for sins I haven't committed.

So we need to practice in the Christian life continually coming before God in confession, repentance, and then accepting his cleansing and forgiving in our lives. We need to keep short accounts with God. Don't allow your sins to pile up lest you drift away from God. Rather as soon as you become aware of something that is wrong in your life, confess it immediately and claim God's forgiveness and cleansing.

John goes on in chapter 3 to say that, having become regenerate Christians, we don't need to keep on sinning. We are freed from the bondage to sin. We are free now not to practice sin. 1 John 3:6-9 says,

No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he is righteous. He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.

Now does John mean that once you are born of God – once you are a regenerate Christian – that you will live a sinless life? Evidently not! We have already seen back in chapter 1 he says that if we say we have no sin, we lie and the truth is not in us. He says therefore you need to confess your sins and claim God's forgiveness and cleansing. Rather the present tense of the verbs here indicates that no regenerate Christian can live a lifestyle of sin. No one who is born of God just goes on repeatedly committing sin, living a life of sin. No one who is born of God practices sin because God's nature abides in him, and therefore he is regenerate and will be living a new life free from the bondage of sin. That doesn't mean that he will never fall, but when he does fall he can bring that to God in confession and be forgiven and cleansed.

So once a person is a regenerate Christian, there should be evidence of that fact in a change of lifestyle. I think what John is excluding here would be someone who says, "Oh, yes, when I was eight-years old I responded to an altar call at our church" then he's lived life like the devil ever since then. I think John would say that such a person has no right to think that he is a regenerate Christian. He can have no assurance of the forgiveness of his sins. It is not enough just to have made a confession at some point earlier in your life if it hasn't wrought any effect in your life. A person who is truly born of God is now indwelt with the divine nature and therefore this ought to work itself out in some difference in his life – a freedom from the bondage of sin in that person's life.

So regeneration is related to justification in that the former is experiential and the latter is forensic or legal. Regeneration is experiential – an actual change that takes place in you.

You are revived through the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. By contrast, as we shall see, justification is a forensic event, a matter of what God declares. He declares you to be righteous. You are then a baby Christian still advancing toward righteousness in your life. Being justified or declared righteous doesn't mean that you suddenly become righteous in an experiential sense. So I would see regeneration and justification as co-incident but belonging to two different orders of things. The one is experiential and involves an actual change as an event. The other is forensic and legal. That doesn't mean it's not real, but it is a declared righteousness. We'll talk more about that when we get to justification.

So as born again Christians we are no longer in bondage to sin, we have the freedom now to live lives that are free of sin even if on occasion we do stumble and fall. And when we do, then we need to practice confession to claim God's forgiveness and cleansing.

5. Finally, *this new birth is available to anyone*. In John 3:3, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." This is available to anyone who will come to Christ, to be born anew, and that will then give him membership in God's Kingdom.

In our lesson next week we'll talk further about the nature of regeneration – what it is and what it is not. Until then, may God guide you and give you a great week.¹²

Lecture 11: How Regeneration Occurs

We've been talking about the doctrine of regeneration, or what is popularly called the new birth. Last time we saw what was involved in the nature of regeneration. Today we want to wrap up this section before we turn to the subject of justification.

Let's turn again to John chapter 3, the classic New Testament passage on the new birth – Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus. I want to say a few words about what the new birth is *not*, based on this passage.

First, it's clear that *the new birth is not a matter of religious heritage*. In verse 1 it tells us, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." This man had a tremendous religious pedigree. He was a member of a religious order within Judaism that was extremely strict. They were meticulous about observing the Old Testament law. Yet it was to this man that Jesus said, "You need to be born anew in order to see the Kingdom of God." So it is not enough just to have a particular denominational background or religious heritage in order to be a regenerate Christian.

Second, by the same token, it is clear that *rebirth is not something that is biologically inheritable or something that is a matter of one's family*. In verse 4, Nicodemus says, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" This is probably intended to be a pretty sarcastic remark on Nicodemus' part. Nicodemus isn't serious here. He's really ridiculing – mocking – what Jesus said. Jesus in turn answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." So this is a spiritual rebirth. It is not a matter of biology or family inheritance.

Third, *rebirth is not a physical process*. Notice that Jesus says, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit." It is your spirit that is regenerated, which is born anew, by the Holy Spirit, so that what was once dead is now alive and in fellowship and communion with God. So this is an inner spiritual quickening that enlivens the spiritual element in a person and puts him into a right relationship with God.

Fourth, *rebirth is not something that is granted by human beings*. Jesus goes on to say in verses 7-8, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit." It is the Holy Spirit who sovereignly bestows the new birth. It is not something that is granted by human beings; it is no more under the control of human beings than is the wind. Rather, this is something that God does.

Finally, *rebirth is not just a matter of right doctrine or head knowledge*. In verses 10-11 Jesus says, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony.” Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel. He was trained in Old Testament law. Yet, he was an unregenerate man. Head knowledge is not enough to ensure a genuine rebirth of the spirit and a right relationship with God.

So this new birth – regeneration – is something that is not a matter of religious heritage, not inheritable biologically or from one’s family, not a physical process, not under human control, and not a matter of simply believing intellectually right doctrine.

So how does the new birth work? How does regeneration occur? How is one born anew? Let’s look at a couple of passages that are relevant to these questions. First is John 1:12-13, just a couple of pages over from the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Here John writes,

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Here we have the spiritual rebirth that Jesus describes in his conversation with Nicodemus. It is something that comes from God and is given to everyone who welcomes Christ and believes in his name.

Second, look at Titus 3:3-7. Titus 3:3-7 is a wonderful passage describing our salvation. Paul says,

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another; but when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.

What do we learn from these two passages about the new birth and how one comes to be a regenerate Christian?

First notice that it is open to all people. John says “to all who received him.” To everyone who believed in his name, he gave this privilege to become God’s children. So this is an open invitation to everyone.

And the first step to take is *repentance*. In Titus, Paul talks about how we once lived under the slavery of passion and sin, malice and envy, hating others and hated by them. It

is from this life of sin that one must turn. That is what repentance means. It means to turn your back on that life and turn toward God for forgiveness and cleansing. So the first step toward being born again is repentance, turning away from the old life, and turning now to God.

The next step is *placing one's faith in Christ*. John says in verse 12, "To all who received him, who believed in his name." So having repented of sin, one turns to God and places one's faith in Jesus Christ. It is not enough just to give intellectual assent to Christian doctrines about Christ. It is not enough to believe *that* Jesus was the Son of God, *that* Jesus died on the cross for my sins, *that* God raised him from the dead. True, all of these things must be believed. But that is not sufficient for saving faith. Notice that it says here, "They believed in his name." It is not just a matter of believing propositional truths about Christ. It is believing *in Christ*. It is trusting in him, committing your life to him. This is the full concept of saving faith: not just intellectual assent to doctrines about Christ, but trusting in him personally; placing your faith in him.

Notice that John says that those who believed in his name "received Christ." And by that he means they welcomed him. They welcomed Christ as their Savior and their Lord. By so doing, by placing one's faith in Christ, by believing in him and welcoming him into your life, you receive the Holy Spirit of Christ and are born again. Remember what Titus says. He says, "He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit whom he poured out upon us richly." So when a person believes in Jesus Christ and welcomes him into his life, the Holy Spirit comes into that person and regenerates his spirit. That dead spirit that was previously darkened and alienated from God is now quickened and comes alive and comes into a relationship with God.

This may be a little confusing to some of you because we often hear about the need to receive Christ, rather than to receive the Holy Spirit. But I think that the idiom of "receiving Christ" is just a way of saying what is technically receiving the Holy Spirit. Look at Romans 8:9-10. In Romans 8:9-10, we see that the Holy Spirit comes in the place of Christ while Christ is absent from this universe, having ascended into heaven. The Holy Spirit who comes in the place of Christ and continues his ministry becomes so closely identified with Christ that he is referred to as Christ. Paul writes,

But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness.

This is a description of the regenerate Christian – someone whose spirit is alive because of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Notice the progression in Paul's references to the Holy Spirit. He first says "the Spirit of God," then "the Spirit of Christ," and finally simply

“Christ.” The Holy Spirit is so closely identified with Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit, indwelling the believer, living within us and quickening our spirits, is referred to as Christ. So when you receive the Holy Spirit, you are, so to speak, receiving Christ because the Holy Spirit continues the ministry of Jesus Christ.

When one receives the Holy Spirit, then one is born anew – one is regenerated – into a new living relationship with God. One becomes united with Christ, as we saw in our previous study about our mystical union with Christ, and heir to all of the promises that belong to those in Christ.

So this is a transformation that is available to anyone who will turn in repentance away from sin and to Christ in faith, believe in his name, and welcome him into that person’s life, and thereby receive the Holy Spirit of Christ who will regenerate him and transform him from the inside out and so change his life.

Now, it may be the case that there is someone watching today who has never come to know God in that way, who has never been born again. If you are not sure that you are a regenerate Christian, I want to give you a chance now to make that sort of commitment at this time. There is no sort of recipe for doing this, but I think it is entirely appropriate to come to God in prayer and to talk to him about it and to ask him to come into your life, to give you the Holy Spirit, and to regenerate you. So what I’d like to do now is to pause and take a moment to have such a prayer of invitation for anyone who would like to pray it silently along with me. Let’s pray:

Lord Jesus, I really need you. I recognize that I’ve made a mess of my life and that by my wrongdoing I have sinned against you. I believe that you came and died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin and that you rose from the dead to prove who you are. Right now, in the best way I know how, I open the door to my life and I welcome you to come in as my Savior and my Lord. Come into my life. Forgive my sins. Cleanse me of my sins and transform me to make me into the kind of person you want me to be. Send me your Holy Spirit to quicken my spirit and make me alive to a new relationship with you. Right now, as an expression of my faith, I thank you for hearing this prayer and answering it. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, then I can give you assurance, based on Scripture, that God has heard that prayer and he answers that prayer to come into your life. I would encourage you now to begin to look for signs of that renewed spirit within you. The Bible says that when we become regenerate Christians, we are like little infants and so we need to be nourished by the milk of the Word of God which is the Bible. So you should begin to pray regularly, to read the Bible on a regular basis, and to be nourished by it. You don’t arrive in the Christian life stillborn. Rather, like a little baby, you begin to grow and

become stronger in your Christian life, as you are nourished and as you walk with him. I hope that these Defenders lessons will be of help to you as you do.

Next time we are going to turn to the subject of justification. Until then, have a great week.¹³

Lecture 12: Different Views of Justification

We've been talking about the doctrine of salvation. Today we begin a new subsection on the doctrine of justification.

The key term in this section is, of course, the term "to justify," which is the Greek word *dikaioō*. This means to put into a right relationship with God. Justification is that act of God whereby he puts us into a right relationship with him. However, Protestants and Catholics have traditionally had very different understandings of justification.

Let's look at some of the different views of justification. Let's talk first about the view of the Protestant Reformers.

The traditional Protestant Reformation understanding of justification is that justification is a *forensic* term. That is to say, it is a judicial act of God. We are not made righteous in the sense that we suddenly become virtuous people, selfless and loving; rather we are declared righteous, much as in a court of law the jury might declare the accused not guilty.

Similarly, in justification God declares us *righteous* – to be justified before him – even if our immediate experience or moral character is not yet transformed into that new legal standing.

So "justification" may be defined as that judicial act of God's free mercy whereby he pronounces sinners condemned under the law guiltless, constitutes them as righteous, once for all, in the righteousness of Christ – on the ground of his atoning work by grace through faith alone apart from works–, and assures them of a full pardon, acceptance in his sight, adoption as sons, heirs of eternal life, and citizenship in his Kingdom.

This forensic, or judicial, understanding of justification is based in texts like Romans 4:2-8. There Paul writes,

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin."

And then in Romans 4:23-25 Paul goes on to say,

But the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

In Galatians 3, Paul gives a pithy summary of this same truth. In Galatians 3:6 Paul says, “Thus Abraham ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’” Notice the forensic language that is employed in this passage. It is not that Abraham was suddenly transformed into a virtuous and moral man. Rather, because he had faith in God, because he believed God’s promises, he was counted as being righteous. The language is reminiscent of the way a merchant settles his accounts. So this is a declaration that Abraham is righteous on the basis of the exercise of his faith. By his faith he was reckoned, or accounted, by God as righteous wholly apart from any works that he did. Similarly, Paul says “for us who believe” (that is to say, believe in Jesus Christ as Lord) “our faith will be reckoned as righteousness.” We will be counted as righteous in view of our faith in Christ – not because of any good works that we’ve done, but simply because we have placed our trust in him.

This forensic, or judicial, understanding of justification on the part of the Protestant Reformers stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic view of justification, as well as to a very recent view called the New Perspective on Paul. Let’s talk first about the contrast with the traditional Roman Catholic view of justification.

In the traditional understanding of Catholic theology, justification is not simply a judicial declaration that one is forgiven and counted righteous by God. Rather, it is the actual imparting of moral righteousness to the believer. During the Council of Trent, which was held between 1546 to 1563, the Roman Catholic Church promulgated the doctrine that righteousness is something that is intrinsic to the believer – that God makes the believer himself morally righteous. This is in opposition to Luther who claimed that righteousness is something declared by God and is imputed to the believer.

At Trent it was declared righteousness is intrinsic to me as a believer. It is not extrinsic; it is rather intrinsic to me. God actually makes me righteous. It is my righteousness that I come to possess. By contrast, on the Reformers’ view, righteousness is extrinsic, not intrinsic. It is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to you. It is not your righteousness that God produces. Rather, it is extrinsic in contrast to Trent which treats it as intrinsic.

Similarly, at Trent the believer is said to be actually made righteous, not simply declared to be righteous, whereas, for the Protestant Reformers, the believer is declared to be righteous by God on the basis of his faith. The difference is that on the Roman Catholic

view righteousness is *imparted* to or *infused in* the believer, whereas on the Reformation view righteousness is legally *imputed* to the believer. On the Roman Catholic view righteousness is actually imparted to the believer – he becomes a righteous person – whereas on the Reformers’ view it is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to the believer, credited to his account, so to speak.

On the Roman Catholic view justification is thus both an event and a process. It begins with the first impartation or infusion of righteousness, and then God imparts more and more righteousness over time. You become more and more justified before him as you increase in righteousness by receiving God’s grace through the sacraments provided by the church. By contrast, on the Reformers’ view justification is not a process.

Sanctification is a process; but justification is not. Justification is something that is declared by God and is complete and over and done with when a person turns to Christ in faith. He is declared righteous and his sins are forgiven. It is not a process that transpires over time.

So if we look at some of the statements from the Council of Trent, I think we can get a clear understanding of the Roman Catholic perspective. At the Council of Trent, they provide the following brief description of the justification of the sinner and its mode in the state of grace. This is what the Council says,

In which words is given a brief description of the justification of the sinner, as being a translation from that state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior.

So justification is this translation out of the state of corruption and condemnation that we are in as a result of Adam’s Fall and into the state of grace. Such an affirmation could be made, I think, by the Protestant Reformers as well, so long as one is talking about a change of legal status.

But in chapter 7, the Council goes on to explain in what the justification of the sinner consists. It says,

This disposition or preparation [that is, the preparation of the human will by God’s prevenient grace to place one’s faith in Christ] is followed by justification itself, which is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of the grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just and from being an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an heir according to hope of life everlasting.

So you can see that justification involves the sanctification of the inner man through God’s grace. It goes on to say,

. . . the single formal cause is the justice of God [that is, the righteousness of God], not that by which He Himself is just, but that by which He makes us just, that, namely, with which we being endowed by Him, are renewed in the spirit of our mind, and not only are we reputed but we are truly called and are just, receiving justice [or righteousness] within us, each one according to his own measure, which the Holy Ghost distributes to everyone as He wills, and according to each one's disposition and cooperation.

So the righteousness of God is actually imparted to the believer. It is this renewal and making of righteousness within the believer.

Finally, in chapter 10, Trent speaks of the increase of this justification which we've received. The Council says,

Having, therefore, been thus justified and made the friends and domestics of God, advancing from virtue to virtue, they are renewed, as the Apostle says, day by day, that is, mortifying the members of their flesh, and presenting them as instruments of justice [or righteousness] unto sanctification, they, through the observance of the commandments of God and of the Church, faith cooperating with good works, increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified . . .

So you actually get more justification as time goes on and as you grow in the grace of God. Your justification increases. In canon 24, the Council says,

If anyone says that the justice [or righteousness] received is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema.

So the Council here condemns those who, like the Protestant Reformers, say that one's justification before God is not increased by the good works that you do, that these good works are the fruit or the signs of justification. The Catholic view is, no, these good works that you do as a Christian are the cause of the increase of your justification.

I think you can see that justification in the Roman Catholic view is thus very different than the Reformers' view. It is not a judicial or forensic act or declaration on God's part; it is a kind of moral transformation that begins in the believer when he places his faith in Christ and which is then increased or augmented as that believer participates in the sacraments of the church and leads an obedient life to Christ.

Next time we'll have a look at yet another perspective on justification, the so-called New Perspective on Paul. In the meantime, may you walk with him this week.¹⁴

Lecture 13: Assessment of Competing Views of Justification

Today we have a very interesting and important topic to discuss. Last time we looked at the contrasting views of the Protestant Reformers and traditional Roman Catholic theologians concerning the nature of justification. We saw that Catholics traditionally understand justification to be the infusion of moral virtue into us, something that can increase over time, while the Protestant Reformers understood justification to be a change of legal status before God which is accomplished once and for all. Today we want to come to some assessment of these competing views.

By way of assessment, I think that the Protestant Reformers correctly understood Paul to be talking about a legal act whereby we are reckoned to be righteous. We are not somehow morally transformed into virtuous people; rather God declares us to be righteous. We are reckoned as righteous because we have placed our faith in Christ.

One way to appreciate this is to realize that the opposite of justification is condemnation. The opposite of justification is not moral turpitude. Rather, the opposite of justification is condemnation. When a criminal is condemned by the court, he acquires a legal status that is the opposite of acquittal by the court or pardon by an executive authority. The language of the New Testament reflects this opposition between justification and condemnation for those who are not in Christ Jesus. For example, Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In Romans 8:33-34, Paul says, "It is God who justifies; who is to condemn?" Do you see the polar opposites there? God is the one who justifies. Who is there to condemn? Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The peace with God spoken of here doesn't mean a kind of inner feeling of tranquility or serenity. Rather, it means that the enmity with God has been removed. We have been reconciled to God. Our sins are no longer counted against us. God's wrath and justice have been propitiated. God is no longer the one who condemns us, but now he is the one who justifies us.

So if you think of justification as the opposite of condemnation, I think you'll have a pretty firm handle on the Reformers' idea of justification as a legal act of God whereby you are pardoned, and declared to be righteous through Christ's righteousness.

Now sometimes New Testament scholars will say that according to the view that we are discussing here we are acquitted before the bar of God's justice. But technically speaking, that's a misunderstanding. We have been found guilty and condemned by God as the righteous Judge. His verdict is not overturned, as by some divine court of appeals. Our condemnation is just. Rather what God does is offer us a legal pardon which absolves us

of guilt. Just as the governor or the President can pardon a condemned criminal who has been sentenced to death, so that he becomes guiltless in the eyes of the law and is no longer liable to punishment, so God as the Ruler of the world can issue a divine pardon for our sins, so that we become guiltless and are set free.

Thus, there is a enormous difference between divine forgiveness and forgiveness in personal human relationships. For personal forgiveness does not absolve the wrongdoer of guilt. Even though the victim of a crime, and even the judge in a case, may personally forgive the criminal, that criminal can still be prosecuted for his crime and justly punished for it. But a pardon absolves the criminal of his guilt and removes his liability to punishment. Someone who has been pardoned for a crime cannot be justly punished for that crime. God's forgiveness, then, is like a legal pardon which takes away our guilt and sets us free. Thus, justification is legal in nature, just as the Protestant Reformers saw.

Now it might be thought that this legal view of justification amounts to nothing more than a legal fiction – you do not really become righteous; your righteousness is just a legal fiction. Legal fictions play an important role in our justice system. For example, in U.S. maritime law, ships have the legal status of persons. Now obviously, ships are not really persons. But the law has adopted the legal fiction of ship personification in order to make possible the prosecution of certain crimes on the high seas like violating embargo laws.

But clearly justification is not a legal fiction like that. Rather, we really are pardoned by God. Our guilt is absolved. A good illustration of this change of legal status is marriage. When a man and a woman are pronounced man and wife, there is an actual change of legal status that takes place. They are no longer single now in the eyes of the law; they are in this new legal state of marriage. That is not a legal fiction. There is no sort of pretense here that is going on. They really are now married. It is official before the law. The couple may feel exactly the same as they did before they got married, but their status has now changed in view of the declaration of marriage. Similarly, when we are justified by God, it is not as though God pretends that we are righteous. Rather, he really does pardon us and declare us to be righteous on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness. So the notion is that we move from a state of condemnation before God to a state of proper relationship with him in which we are no longer guilty but are pardoned of our sin and have the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

The Reformed theologian Michael Horton reports that there is today a “considerable” and “settled” “scholarly consensus,” including Roman Catholic exegetes such as Joseph Fitzmeyer, Raymond Brown, and Karl Rahner, that “Justification is a declarative, judicial

verdict.”¹⁵ This is a very heartening development and a significant step toward achieving unity of Christian doctrine.

Now I want to introduce yet another alternative to the Reformation view of justification, and this is a contemporary alternative – indeed a very recent alternative – that is known as the New Perspective on Paul. The claim of the adherents of the New Perspective is that the traditional Reformers have seriously misunderstood Paul and that when we correctly interpret Paul we see that in fact he’s not really all that different from what the Judaism of his day was saying.

One of the key figures in the so-called New Perspective on Paul is the biblical scholar E.P. Sanders. One of Sanders’ pivotal works is called *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, published in 1977. Now, you may ask, “What is the force of that word ‘Palestinian?’” Well, Palestine was the name of the Roman province that is occupied by Israel. So Palestinian Judaism was the Judaism of the people who lived in that region that we today call Israel. This was in contrast to the Jews who were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. There were Jews living in Egypt, Jews living in Rome, Jews living in Greece, Jews living in Syria. These Jews were part of the Diaspora, or the Dispersion, as it’s called. And what Sanders is writing about is Judaism as it existed in the Jewish homeland, not in the Dispersion. Often, *that* Judaism is called Hellenistic Judaism because it was in a Greek-speaking culture and as a result absorbed some of the Greek culture. But what Sanders is talking about is the Judaism that existed in Palestine – the Judaism in which the early church was birthed.

Sanders writes this with regard to Paul:

On the point at which many have found the decisive contrast between Paul and Judaism – grace and works – Paul is in agreement with Palestinian Judaism. . . . Salvation is by grace but judgment is according to works; works are the condition of remaining ‘in,’ but they do not earn, salvation.¹⁶

The view here is very subtle. The idea is that one gets into the covenant with God by God’s freely bestowed grace. You are not a member of the saving covenant of God in virtue of your works. It is by God’s grace. But one *remains in* the covenant by doing the works required by the law. Now these good works don’t earn salvation, but they are the instrumental means by which one stays in the covenant. So the claim is that these good works, while not earning salvation, are nevertheless necessary as the instrumental means

¹⁵ Michael S. Horton, “Traditional Reformed View,” in *Justification: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhoads Eddy, assoc. ed. Steven E. Eenderlein, with contributions by Michael F. Bird, James D. G. Dunn, Michael S. Horton, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, and Gerald O’Collins, S. J., and Oliver Rafferty, S. J. (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012), p. 93.

¹⁶ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 543.

by which a person remains in the covenant to which God has invited him by means of his grace.

So Sanders distinguishes between *getting in* and *staying in*. You get into the covenant by God's grace. But the way you stay in is by doing the good works that are required by the law to stay in that covenant. Those works don't earn your salvation but nevertheless they are the means by which you stay in this saving relationship with God.

Some have been persuaded that Paul's view is really no different than that of Palestinian Judaism. You are saved by grace but you stay in by means of doing good works.

Next time we'll offer some assessment of this New Perspective on Paul. Until then may God go with you and guide you throughout the coming week.¹⁷

Lecture 14: The New Perspective on Paul

It's so great to know that people from all around the world are joining us this morning for our Defenders class.

Last time I introduced the so-called New Perspective on Paul. Today we want to come to some assessment of the New Perspective. The claim of the adherents of the New Perspective, you'll remember, is that the traditional Protestant Reformers have seriously misunderstood Paul and that when we correctly interpret Paul we see that in fact he's not really saying anything all that different from what the Judaism of his day was saying, namely, you are saved by grace but then you stay in the covenant by means of doing good works.

A very penetrating critique of the New Perspective has been written by the New Testament scholar Robert Gundry. He writes an essay called "The Inferiority of the New Perspective on Paul" in his book *The Old Is Better*, published in 2005. Gundry doesn't mince words, does he? "The *Inferiority* of the New Perspective on Paul"! Gundry agrees with E. P. Sanders that the evidence of Palestinian Judaism shows that Jews had a strong emphasis upon obedience to the law as the way of staying in the covenant. So Palestinian Judaism was preoccupied with legal matters – how you apply the law to various situations, what the law really requires of you; extensive wrangling over the requirements of the law because this is the means by which one stays in the covenant with God. But Gundry denies that Paul has a similar emphasis. He writes,

Though obedience is integral and important to Paul's theology, along side Palestinian Jewish absorption in legal questions his comments on obedience look proportionately slight. Furthermore, they usually take the form of exhortations, not of legal interpretation, extension, and application.¹⁸

So what Gundry is saying here is that obedience is important to Paul. That is an integral part of Paul's theology – that having come to faith in Christ you now live a life of good works worthy of Christ. But Gundry says that it's very different from Palestinian Judaism. Paul isn't concerned about interpretations of the Jewish law, about how to extend the Jewish law to new situations that are not obviously covered by the law, wrangling over how the law is to be applied to this or that circumstance. Think of Paul's letters. You don't find anything like that in the New Testament epistles. Indeed, as Gundry says, Paul's comments on obedience usually just take the form of exhortations like "Put away all wrath, malice, slander, envy, and foul talk from your mouths" (Colossians 3:8); "Have this mind among yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus"

¹⁸ Robert H. Gundry, *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. 200.

(Philippians 2:5); “put to death the works of the flesh but walk in the Spirit” (Romans 8:13; Galatians 5:16-18). These exhortations to holy living that Paul gives are very different from the sort of legal debates that characterized Palestinian Judaism. Think, for example, of the book of Galatians. In Galatians Paul does not think of works as the means of staying in the covenant. The whole emphasis throughout Galatians is that both getting in and staying in is a matter of faith in Christ. It is faith from beginning to end. Faith in Christ is the means by which we get into relationship with God, and it is faith in Christ that is the means of staying in relationship with God, not works of the law.

Gundry recognizes that Paul does require, of course, that faith be attended by good works. If you have genuine saving faith, then you will do good works. But he distinguishes Paul’s view from Judaism’s view in that these good works are not the *means* of staying in; rather they are the *evidence* of genuine faith. That’s the difference. Paul emphasizes the importance of good works not as *the means of staying in* the covenant. Rather, they are *evidence* that your faith is truly genuine. Here is what Gundry writes,

At the same time Paul demands good works, and Sanders appeals to this demand [in order to justify his interpretation]. But Paul’s un-Jewish extension of faith and grace to staying in makes good works evidential of having received grace through faith, not instrumental in keeping grace through works. . . . For him, then, getting in and staying in are covered by the seamless robe of faith as opposed to works with the result that works come in as evidential rather than instrumental.¹⁹

Do you understand what Gundry is saying? He’s saying that for Paul good works *are* necessary, but they are necessary as evidence of the genuineness of your faith. They are not necessary as the instruments by means of which you stay in the covenant. They are not the instrumental means by which you stay in the covenant; rather, they are evidential in showing that you really are in a saving relationship with God through faith. So Paul’s emphasis is very different from the Judaism of his day. For Paul, it is faith from beginning to end that enables you both to get into the covenant and to stay in the covenant, and good works serve an evidential purpose.

Gundry also recognizes that Paul does say that in the end people will be judged according to their works. Sanders uses these sorts of statements to argue that on the question of staying in the covenant, Paul holds fast to the Jewish mode of thinking, according to which avoiding evil works and doing good works are the condition of staying in the covenant even though they don’t *earn* salvation. So Sanders admits that these works don’t merit salvation. That’s not their purpose. Nevertheless they are the means of staying in the covenant, and Sanders thinks that Paul believes that, since Paul says people will be judged according to their works.

¹⁹ Gundry, *The Old is Better*, p. 203.

But as Gundry points out, “The evidence Sanders cites from Palestinian Jewish literature shows overwhelmingly that good works are a *condition* as well as a sign of staying in.”²⁰ That is to say, for the Judaism of Paul’s day the evidence shows overwhelmingly, Gundry says, that good works are not merely a *sign* that one is in the covenant; they are the *condition*, they are *how* you stay in the covenant. So he agrees with Sanders that he has correctly interpreted Palestinian Jewish literature in that respect.

But Gundry goes on to say, “It appears, however, that for Paul good works are only (but not unimportantly!) a *sign* of staying in as well as of getting in.”²¹ So for Paul good works are not the condition of salvation; rather they are the sign that one is a *bona fide* member of the covenant. Gundry interprets 2 Corinthians 13:5 in this light: “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves.” Gundry says this points to the evidential role of good works. You examine yourself to see if your life befits a relationship with Christ. Test yourself to see if your faith is genuine. This is pointing to the evidence of your good works, not the means or condition of salvation.

So, it seems to me that the key difference between Sanders and Gundry is that Sanders interprets these good works to be for Paul a condition of salvation whereas Gundry sees them as evidence of salvation.

How shall we understand this distinction between “condition” and “evidence” that is drawn here? It occurs to me that a bit of logic can actually be helpful in making sense of both Sanders’ view and Gundry’s insight. In logic, if you have a statement like “P implies Q” then P is a *sufficient* condition of Q. That is to say, the truth of P is a sufficient condition for the truth of Q. If P implies Q, then if P is true, Q is also true. That’s what it means to say P implies Q. The truth of P is a sufficient condition for the truth of Q. In turn, the truth of Q is a *necessary* condition of the truth of P. In order for P to be true, Q must be true. Why is that? Because P implies Q. P is never true without Q’s also being true, because P implies Q. So, in order for P to be true, Q also has to be true. Otherwise, you could have P be true all on its own and Q not be true as well. So in order for P to be true, Q must be true, which means that Q is a necessary condition of P. So in an if-then statement, P implies Q, P is a sufficient condition for the truth of Q, and the truth of Q is a necessary condition for the truth of P.

Perhaps you can already see where I am going with this. Consider the statement:

If one has genuine saving faith, one will do good works.

This has the logical form of P implies Q. It is a conditional statement. If one has genuine saving faith, then one will do good works.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

²¹ Gundry, *The Old is Better*, p. 221.

Now, what that means is that genuine saving faith is a sufficient condition for doing good works. If you have genuine saving faith then you'll perform good works. So a sufficient condition of doing good works is having genuine saving faith. But notice then that in a *logical* sense, doing good works is a necessary condition of genuine saving faith. You don't have genuine saving faith without also doing good works. So in a logical sense good works are a necessary condition of salvation, not because they contribute to salvation or because they are the means by which one stays in the covenant; rather, they are a necessary condition simply in the purely logical sense that genuine saving faith doesn't exist without being accompanied by these good works.

I think this can help us to put Sanders' and Gundry's views together. If I'm correct – and I think Paul would agree with this statement – then in a logical sense Sanders is right that good works are a necessary condition of salvation. Good works in a *logical sense* are a necessary condition of salvation. Nevertheless, Gundry is also correct in saying that although good works are a necessary condition of salvation they are not instrumental in bringing about salvation. They are not the *means* by which salvation is achieved. Rather, good works are the necessary *byproduct* or concomitant of saving faith. So even though they are a necessary condition of saving faith in a logical sense, nevertheless Gundry is right in saying that they are not the instrumental cause of salvation.

Gundry says, and I'll conclude with this quotation from his essay, "The question is not whether Paul taught the necessity of good works but whether such necessary works are evidential of salvation or contributory to salvation." Do you hear the distinction that is going on there? The question is not whether Paul taught that good works are necessary. They *are* a necessary condition of salvation! But that's not the issue. Rather, he says, the question is "whether such necessary works are *evidential* of salvation or *contributory* to salvation." Are they merely the *sign* of genuine saving faith or are they the *means* by which one stays in the covenant or finds salvation? Gundry concludes,

If Paul taught them as necessary evidence of salvation but not as a necessary contribution to it, then his teaching on works does not create an inconsistency with his teaching on justification by faith apart from meritorious works.²²

So it seems to me that once we make the fine distinctions that we can logically, I think we can embrace the insight of Sanders that for Paul, logically speaking, good works are a necessary condition of salvation, but then we see with Gundry that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith apart from works consistently holds that the good works are neither meritorious nor are they the instrumental means which contribute to salvation. Rather, they serve as necessary evidence of genuine saving faith on the part of the regenerate believer.

²² Ibid., p. 224.

The next time we meet, we'll continue our discussion on the so-called New Perspective on Paul.²³

Lecture 15: New Perspective on Paul Continued

Welcome to Defenders. I'm glad that you could join us for this important lesson on the doctrine of salvation and in particular the doctrine of justification which lies at the very heart of the Christian faith.

Today we want to continue our discussion of the so-called "New Perspective on Paul." The New Perspective offers a view of justification which is radically different than traditional Catholic and Protestant perspectives. This time the dispute concerns the meaning of Paul's phrase "the righteousness of God" (*dikaiōsynē theou*). Some proponents of the New Perspective construe God's righteousness to be his faithfulness to the covenant. Proponents of the New Perspective think of God's righteousness as a relational, not a normative, concept and identify it with God's being faithful to his covenant people.

This claim seems to be implausible on the face of it, for it amounts to nothing less than the claim that English translators, not to mention non-English translators, have for generations actually mistranslated the expression *dikaiōsynē theou*, since the English word "righteousness" just does not mean *faithfulness*. The Hebrew word *sedek* (also, in effect, mistranslated by "righteousness") is also said not to express a normative concept like *goodness* but rather a relational concept like *faithful to*.

If one reduces God's righteousness to his covenant faithfulness, this will radically impact one's understanding of Paul's doctrine of justification. For then justification is not about God's reckoning us to be guiltless by the standard of divine justice but rather reckoning to us covenant faithfulness. The problem with this is that faithfulness to the covenant would not suffice for salvation. When Paul declares in Philippians 3:6-9 his desire for a righteousness "that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith," he is not longing for faithfulness to the covenant, for he says that he was already "blameless" in that respect and it availed him nothing.

The implausibility of the New Perspective's reductionism with respect to righteousness is perhaps best seen by asking what the opposite of righteousness, that is, unrighteousness, is said by Paul to be. It is not unfaithfulness, but rather wickedness and ungodliness (Romans 1:18) or lawlessness (2 Corinthians 6:14). Faithlessness is but one of the many sins listed by Paul in Romans 1:29-31 which result in God's just condemnation.

Righteousness is a broad moral property which entails faithfulness, since to break one's word is wrong, but is not reducible to faithfulness. As Mark Seifrid puts it, "All 'covenant-keeping' is righteous behavior, but not all righteous behavior is 'covenant-keeping.' It is misleading, therefore, to speak of 'God's righteousness' as his 'covenant-

faithfulness.”²⁴ Seifrid points out that righteousness language in the Old Testament has primarily to do with God’s role as Judge and Ruler of creation. As such it is a normative concept, having to do with God’s establishing right moral order in the world. It takes on a positive or salvific sense because the biblical writers expect God to intervene to reinstate right order when it is usurped by evil in the world. It takes on a negative or punitive sense because the biblical writers expect a reinstatement of right order by God to involve the punishment of the wicked. As Seifrid so aptly puts it, “Retribution remains on the ‘backside’ of divine acts of righteousness.”²⁵ So while there are 64 instances of God’s saving righteousness in the Old Testament, Seifrid counts as well 15 cases in which God’s righteousness is conceived in retributive or punitive terms. God’s righteousness comprises both aspects.

Moreover, although the intention of proponents of the New Perspective is to explain God’s “justification” of the Gentiles as his declaring them to be “righteous” (that is, faithful to the covenant), in fact the New Perspective, by reducing God’s righteousness to his covenant faithfulness, does not make sense of God’s relation to Gentiles, since they stand outside the covenant made with Israel. If unrighteousness is unfaithfulness to the covenant, then Gentiles cannot be said to be unrighteous, which is expressly said by Paul in Romans 1:18. Nor could a Gentile like Job be said to be righteous, as the Lord himself affirms, since he was not faithful to the covenant.

In point of fact, no connection between justification and covenant faithfulness seems to exist. Seifrid observes that of the 283 occurrences of the word “covenant” and the over 500 occurrences of the word “righteousness” in the Old Testament in only seven instances are the two words used together.²⁶ In general, one does not act righteously or unrighteously with respect to a covenant. Rather one “keeps,” “remembers,” or “establishes” a covenant, or, conversely, one “breaks,” “transgresses,” or “despises” a covenant. In speaking of righteousness as covenant faithfulness, proponents of the New Perspective seem to be guilty of a category mistake – mixing apples and oranges as it were.

In any case, the reductionistic interpretation of *dikaiōsynē theou* as covenant faithfulness has now been shown to be linguistically untenable. Charles Irons’ *The Righteousness of God* (published in 2015) is the definitive work on this expression and a convincing

²⁴ Mark A. Seifrid, “Righteousness Language in the Hebrew Scriptures and Early Judaism,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism: A Fresh Appraisal of Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, 2 vols., ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, vol. 1: *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, WUNT II/140 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), p. 424.

²⁵ Mark A. Seifrid, “Paul’s Use of Righteousness Language against Its Hellenistic Background,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul*, WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 44. Or, more accurately, of God’s saving acts of righteousness.

²⁶ Seifrid, “Righteousness Language,” p. 423.

refutation of the reductionistic interpretation of the New Perspective.²⁷ Irons conducts a thorough investigation of righteousness language in the Hebrew Old Testament, in the Greek Septuagint, and in extra-biblical Jewish writings.

With respect to the use of *sedek* in the Old Testament, Irons finds that the word does not have a relational meaning like *faithfulness*. He says, in the Old Testament “Righteousness is a [normative concept], and the norm is God’s own moral law, which is grounded in his unchanging nature as a God of perfect holiness, justice, and truth.”²⁸ With respect to the Septuagint and extra-biblical Greek no essential differences emerge from Old Testament usage.

In the New Testament Irons finds that the verb “justify” (*dikaioō*) means either “(1) to vindicate someone, or (2) to declare someone to be righteous and to treat them [*sic*] as righteous. . . . For Paul it is a soteriological term that denotes God’s act of forgiving sins and accounting sinners as righteous in his sight.”²⁹ Thus, the translation of the phrase *dikaiōsynē theou* as “the faithfulness of God” is simply incorrect.

Fortunately, proponents of the New Perspective have backed away from the simplistic reductionistic conception of God’s righteousness. For example, the late James D. G. Dunn, in response to his critics, acknowledges that the Hebrew concept of righteousness cannot be reduced to covenant faithfulness or salvation. Righteousness language in the Hebrew Scriptures, he recognizes, also involves punitive divine justice, according to which righteousness is “understood as measured by a norm, right order, or that which is morally right,” with the qualification that “the norm is not seen as some abstract ideal. . . , but rather as a norm concretised in relation” between God and creatures.³⁰

So when we come to Romans, Dunn, says, “That God’s righteousness towards the peoples he has created includes wrath and judgment as well as faithfulness and salvation is clearly implicit in the sequences Romans 1:16-18 and 3:3-6.”³¹ Those who deny that *dikaiōsynē* is a forensic term, Dunn says, pay insufficient attention to Romans 4:4-5, “where the forensic background is clear in the allusion to the legal impropriety of a judge ‘justifying the ungodly’. . . , and where again the thought is entirely of attributing a righteous status to one who is unrighteous.”³² Dunn’s point is that Paul’s referring to God as “him who justifies the ungodly” (Romans 4:5) recalls the Old Testament description of the unjust judge who justifies the wicked (Proverbs 17:15), which is an abomination in

²⁷ Charles Lee Irons, *The Righteousness of God: A Lexical Examination of the Covenant-Faithfulness Interpretation*, WUNT II/386 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³⁰ James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective: whence, what and whither?” in *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 63-64.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

the LORD's sight. French theologian Henri Blocher remarks on "the staggering audacity of Paul's combination of words: God who *justifies* the *ungodly* (Rom 4:5)! Have new perspective (and other scholars) measured the shocking magnitude of this paradox?"³³ Evidently not.

Therefore, the "New Perspective on Paul" has run its useful course and should now be abandoned. The evidence shows clearly that the Protestant Reformers were on target in their doctrine of justification as God's declaration of a new legal status for believers involving a normative right standing before the holy God.

Next time we'll look at what Paul means when he says that believers in Christ are "justified by faith." Until then, may God go with you.³⁴

³³ Henri Blocher, "Justification of the Ungodly (*Sola Fide*): Theological Reflections," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 490.

³⁴ Total Running Time: 14:33 (Copyright © 2020 William Lane Craig)

Lecture 16: Imputed Righteousness

We've been talking about different views of justification. We've looked at the traditional Roman Catholic view of justification, the Reformation view of justification, and the view of the New Perspective on Paul with respect to justification.

Today we want to discuss a further challenge to the Reformers' doctrine of justification which a number of evangelicals find persuasive. That concerns the question of *imputation*.

According to the traditional Reformation view, there is a kind of dual imputation involved in justification. My sin and guilt are imputed to Christ who then pays the penalty for my sin. In turn Christ's righteousness is imputed to me. So in Christ I am righteous; I am declared by God to be righteous on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Some evangelicals hold that although there is an imputation of our sin and guilt to Christ, there is no imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. Rather, justification simply involves the declaration of pardon on God's part. On the basis of Christ's atoning death Christ has taken our sin and guilt from us and now we are declared to be forgiven, and so we are redeemed by Christ. But they would deny that there is any imputation of Christ's righteousness to me. They claim that it is very difficult to find in the New Testament any sort of biblical basis for the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. It is regarded as a theological construct of the Reformers that some would say finds little or no support in Scripture.

For example, Robert Gundry, the same scholar who argued for the inferiority of the New Perspective on Paul, argues that the doctrine of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer is not taught in the New Testament. Gundry looks at passages like Romans 4:2-5 and argues that these passages do not teach the imputation of Christ's righteousness. In Romans 4:2-5 Paul says,

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.

Gundry claims that Paul does not here teach the imputation of Christ's righteousness to Abraham or to the believer. Rather, what he teaches is that God counts, or reckons, one's *faith* as righteousness. Since Abraham had no works by which he might be justified before God, God counted his *faith* as righteousness instead. God chose to reckon his faith to be righteousness, and therefore Abraham was righteous before God.

So there isn't really any imputation in these verses. There is no suggestion in these passages that God attributes to Abraham Christ's righteousness. Rather what God does, since the believer doesn't have any meritorious works, is reckon the believer's faith as righteousness, and hence the believer is counted righteous in virtue of God's counting his faith as righteousness. So it is your own faith that God reckons as righteousness, and there isn't really any imputation of Christ's righteousness to you at all.

On Gundry's view, then, God in effect adopts the legal fiction that our faith is righteousness. Although Gundry denies this characterization of his view as a legal fiction, it is difficult to understand why. We seem to have here a paradigm of a legal fiction: the divine Judge declares that for the purposes of this action he will adopt the assumption that Abraham's faith equals righteousness, even though he knows full well that it does not. It is similar to a case in which the court adopts the fiction, as it did in *Mosteryn v. Fabrigas*, that the Mediterranean island Minorca is part of London, so that a resident of Minorca is, for the purposes of the action, a resident of London. Just as residency in London is reckoned to the plaintiff, so righteousness is reckoned to Abraham.

How might we respond to Gundry's critique of the Reformers' doctrine? It seems to me that the passages in which faith is reckoned as righteousness, such as Romans 4, are not the relevant passages that we ought to be looking to for a doctrine of imputation. Rather, over and over again Paul says that it is by means of our faith (in Christ) that God's righteousness is reckoned to us. For example, "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3:22); "effective through faith" (Romans 3:25); "we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works" (Romans 3:28); "he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith" (Romans 3:30); "we are justified by faith" (Romans 5:1); "much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life" (Romans 5:17); "Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith" (Romans 9:31).

I suspect that Paul would be surprised at Gundry's attribution to him of so wooden a reading of the phrase "his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness." Paul's many statements about how righteousness is acquired through faith probably govern the other passages and are meant to explicate the Old Testament quotation about Abraham, rather than *vice versa*.

Moreover, the view that faith is the means of acquiring the gift of righteousness makes better sense of Paul's not seeing faith as something meritorious in the believer. The view that there is no imputation of Christ's righteousness seems to make faith a meritorious

work. If we have no works to justify us before God, then God looks at us and says, “OK, I am going to treat your faith as though it were righteousness. I am going to reckon to you your faith as righteousness.” But then isn’t our faith somehow turned into a meritorious work that makes us justified before God? God counts my faith as righteousness. Now Gundry responds to that by saying “No, Paul always opposes faith to works.” Paul doesn’t think of faith as a meritorious work. Paul always contrasts faith and works. But surely that is exactly the point! The contrast between faith and works only makes sense, it seems to me, on an imputation sort of view. The notion that faith is opposed to works only seems to make good sense if the righteousness which we have in Christ is extrinsic to us. It is not my faith which is counted as righteous in the sense that I am righteous because of my faith. Rather, there is an extrinsic righteousness which, in virtue of my union with Christ, I now come to share.

Moreover, there are other texts to which one may turn for a doctrine of imputation. For example, Philippians 3:8-9 says,

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith;

Notice that Paul speaks here of an extrinsic righteousness from God which he has through faith. It is a righteousness that comes from God not a righteousness which is his own.

Look also at 2 Corinthians 5:21. Here Paul, speaking of Jesus Christ, says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Now I think there is a dual imputation in view here. For our sake Christ, who knew no sin, the sinless Son of God, was made to be sin. The sinless Son of God was made to be sin for our sake. Then the second clause seems to teach the reverse imputation, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That is to say, insofar as we are in Christ we have God’s own righteousness. That would seem to be an imputed righteousness. It is not a righteousness that we have in and of ourselves. It is not our faith that is being reckoned as righteousness here, is it? Rather, insofar as we are in Christ we become God’s righteousness, just as Christ became sin for us. So I think that on the basis of a passage like 2 Corinthians 5:21, one might plausibly say that we do have the notion of dual imputation – the imputation of our sin to Christ and then of his righteousness to us.

Gundry does discuss this passage. He responds that Paul does not say that *Christ’s* righteousness is ours. Rather Paul says “in Christ we become the righteousness of *God*.” So it isn’t saying the righteousness of *Christ*. Paul could easily have said that. But it says

the righteousness of *God*. Therefore, this isn't contemplating an imputation of Christ's righteousness to us.

Well, I would say in response that since Paul believed Christ to be God, this seems to be quite a trivial difference. Insofar as we are in Christ, we have imputed to us divine righteousness, which is properly Christ's. Remember in our discussion of our mystical union that we have with Christ we talked about how in Christ we are blessed with all of these spiritual blessings in the heavenly places. The righteousness of God would be one of those things that we would have insofar as we are in Christ. So I think it would not be at all inappropriate for Paul to say that in Christ we have the righteousness of God.

Elsewhere in the New Testament Christ is spoken of as God. For example, Acts 20:28 is a very striking example of this. In Acts 20:28, (which is interestingly a Pauline speech – it is Paul's final address to the Ephesian elders), Paul speaks of how God has rescued us “by his own blood.” That is a striking phrase. God the Father doesn't have any blood, right? Because he doesn't have a body. This is clearly Christ's blood; it is Jesus' blood. Yet, Acts 20:28 speaks of God's own blood, which is clearly Christ's blood. So I think it is not at all inappropriate to talk about the righteousness of Christ as the righteousness of God, anymore than to speak of the blood of Christ as the blood of God, as in Acts 20:28. So I think that Gundry's response in no way undermines the notion that insofar as we are in Christ the righteousness of God, that is to say the righteousness that is properly Christ's, is attributed to us.

In conclusion, from what we said today, I think that there are good biblical grounds, and it makes good theological sense as well, to say that not only are our sins imputed to Christ and our sin and guilt borne by Christ, but also there is a reflex imputation in that insofar as we are in Christ and united with him his righteousness (God's righteousness) is imputed to us and God declares us to be righteous in virtue of our union with Christ.

Next time we'll conclude our discussion of justification by looking at the grounds, the means, and the implications of justification. Until we meet again, have a great week.³⁵

Lecture 17: The Grounds, Means, and Results of Justification

We have been talking about the doctrine of justification as a subsection of the locus on the doctrine of salvation. We've spent the lion's share of our time talking about the nature of justification as a legal act on God's part whereby he declares us righteous. Since this is the center of the debate over justification, it is appropriate that we should have spent most of our time there. But now we want to wrap up our study of justification by looking at the grounds of justification, the means of justification, and the results of justification.

Let's talk, first, about the grounds of justification. In terms of the grounds of justification, *justification is grounded first and foremost in God's free will and mercy*. God was under no obligation to forgive or pardon anybody. The fact that he would pardon anyone is the result of his own freedom of choice and his mercy.

Look at what Paul says in Titus 3:5-7, a marvelous passage on justification. There Paul writes,

. . . he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

So the reason that justification is by grace rather than by the merit of our own good works is precisely because it is rooted, as Paul says, "in God's own mercy." Given that all people are justly condemned before God, God is under no obligation to forgive anybody. The fact that he should choose to save even some is a demonstration of God's mercy toward us. I think that is the significance of Romans 9:16. There Paul says, "So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy." Whom God chooses to save is not determined by us; it is determined by God. It is God who has chosen by his own mercy to save whom he chooses to save. He has chosen to save, as I've said in the past, those who have faith in Christ Jesus. So fundamentally the justification that we experience is rooted in God's free will and mercy.

But this isn't to say that God simply blinks at sin, that he just cancels people's sin. Rather there is an atoning sacrifice for those sins that makes the extension of his mercy possible. So *secondly the grounds of justification are the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ*. Look at Romans 5:8-9:

But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

Notice the phrase here “justified by his blood.” The word “blood” here is a metaphor for the death of Christ – that atoning sacrificial death. That is why he says in verse 8 that Christ died for us. The ground of our justification lies in that self-sacrificial atoning death of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Look also at what Paul says in Galatians 3:11-14a. Paul writes,

Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for [and then quoting here from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk] “He who through faith is righteous shall live”; but the law does not rest on faith, for [now here quoting from Leviticus] “He who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, [quoting from Deuteronomy 21:23] “Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree” – that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles . . .

Here Paul says that while no one can be justified before God by the works of the law, nevertheless Christ has died for us – having become a curse for us. The curse of the law, the punishment of sin, that we rightly deserve was meted out upon Christ so that now God’s love and mercy is freed up to pardon and justify us.

So the grounds of justification are, first, God’s free will and mercy and then, second, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sin.

That brings us then to the means of justification. As already indicated, the means by which we are justified is faith. Faith is the channel through which we appropriate God’s forgiveness and justification. Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith . . .” Faith is the instrument, the channel, by which we receive the grace of God. Was this a human setup, this notion of salvation by grace through faith? No, for Paul goes on to say, “. . . this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast.” So it is through placing our faith in God or specifically in Christ that we appropriate the atoning death of Christ on our behalf and so receive God’s grace.

Romans 3:21-26 expands on this. This, like the passage in Titus, is, I think, one of the premier passages in the New Testament speaking of justification. Paul writes,

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it

was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

So who is the person that is justified by God? It is the one who has faith in Jesus. So faith is the channel by which we come to appropriate justification.

I think you can see in Paul's thinking how critical faith is as the means by which we appropriate the benefits of Christ's death and come to experience God's grace. God, in his sovereignty, has chosen to save and to justify those who have faith in Christ Jesus. So it is those who are people of faith that are the true sons of Abraham.

Finally, what are some of the results of justification?

1. First and foremost, as we've seen, *there is full pardon*. Romans 5:18: "Then as one man's trespass [speaking here of Adam] led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men." Then over in chapter 8 in verse 1 Paul says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." For those who are united with Christ by means of faith there is no condemnation. Rather there is full pardon for our sins.

2. *We are adopted as God's children*. In Galatians 4:4-5, Paul says,

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

So insofar as we are in Christ we are adopted by God into his family as children of God and therefore recipients of all the promises that God gives to those who are his sons and daughters.

3. *We become heirs of eternal life*. In Galatians 4:6-7 Paul goes on to say,

And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

Similarly, in Romans 8:16-17, Paul says,

we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

What do we inherit? Paul says in Romans 6:23:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So having been forgiven of all our sins, being declared righteous, having been adopted by God as his children, we are now heirs to eternal life. We shall live with him forever. Death has been forever vanquished.

4. *We become citizens of God's Kingdom.* In Philippians 3:20, Paul says,

For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice that all of these benefits are, like justification itself, legal in nature: pardon, adoption, inheritance, citizenship. There are many other benefits which are wrought by regeneration, such as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, good works, and increasing sanctification. But as a legal notion, justification brings with it legal benefits.

So I think you can see that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith is not just some academic, dry doctrine. Rather this is a doctrine that has tremendous implications. A full pardon for sin and redemption from its penalty, adoption into God's family as his children, becoming heirs of eternal life, and citizenship in God's Kingdom with all its privileges. So this is a tremendously important and encouraging doctrine that has, I think, great import for the Christian life.

Next time we will turn to a study of the doctrine of perseverance. Can those who are genuine, regenerate Christians lose their salvation? We'll raise that question the next time we meet.³⁶

Lecture 18: Perseverance of the Saints - Calvinism

We've been working our way through the doctrine of salvation. So far we've talked about such doctrines as God's election, regeneration, and justification. Today we come to the subject of perseverance. This is often called in popular piety "eternal security." Perhaps you've heard of this doctrine under that label rather than as perseverance of the saints.

The question that we confront here is whether or not a person who has been genuinely regenerated by the Holy Spirit, declared righteous by God, forgiven of his sins, can lose his salvation and fall away and wind up damned, having his lot with the unbelievers and the non-elect? So the question is: if you become a Christian, will you inevitably persevere in the faith until your death so that you will be saved? Or is it possible that you, having once become a Christian, could fall away so that in fact you lose the salvation that you once had?

As with the other issues that we've previously discussed under the doctrine of salvation, there are at least two broad perspectives on this question. One would be the perspective of Calvinism or Reformed theology, which would be represented, for example, in the Reformed Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church, and so on. The other perspective would be the Arminian perspective which would characterize groups like the United Methodist denomination. One should mention that Catholic theology and Lutheran theology would also hold to the perspective that a person can lose his salvation even though they were not under the influence of Jacob Arminius. We will look broadly at Calvinism and Arminianism as our two test cases of this doctrine.

First, let's talk about the Calvinist perspective. With respect to Calvinist theology, the Calvinist theologian holds that the elect cannot fall away. This could be more clearly stated by saying, "Elect *individuals* cannot fall away." If you are an individual person who is elected and predestined by God, regenerated, declared righteous by God, then it is impossible for you to fall away from the faith and to lose your salvation.

What are some of the biblical passages to which the Calvinist might appeal in support of such a view? Look at John 6:39-40. Here Jesus says,

. . . this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

Here Jesus says that no one that the Father has given to him will be lost; rather on the resurrection day Jesus will raise this person to eternal life. So if you are of the elect of God, it is not possible for you to lose your salvation and to perish. You will be raised to eternal life.

Turn over a couple of chapters to John 10:27-30. Here Jesus says,

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one.

Here Jesus says if you are truly a member of his fold then you will not be snatched away. You shall not perish. You will be given eternal life. No one shall snatch you out of Christ's or God the Father's hand. You are secure in him.

Look at John 17 for yet another reiteration of this fact. John 17:11. Jesus is here praying for the church and he says,

And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

Here Jesus prays for you. He prays for the church that they will be kept by the power of God. So we have the prayers of Jesus himself on behalf of the church that they will be preserved. Indeed, in one sense rather than talking about the perseverance of the saints, it might be better to talk about the preservation of the saints. God will preserve them; he will keep them until the final day.

Finally, turn over to John's first epistle – 1 John 3:9. Here John says, "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God." Then over in 1 John 5:18 we read, "We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." Obviously, John didn't think that we live sinless lives as Christians. In fact in the first chapter of his epistle he says that if we confess our sins, then God is faithful and just to forgive our sins. He knows that as Christians we will on occasion sin. But what he seems to be talking about here would be a lifestyle of sin that would be antithetical to being a Christian. What he says is that the one who is born of God is kept by God. He says he who is born of God (that is, Christ) keeps him and therefore the evil one does not touch him. Christ himself will keep you from this life of sin that would result in your perdition. So one is secure if you are living this righteous life for God that is consistent with being a Christian.

Paul the apostle might also be thought to have taught the same thing. In Paul's epistle to the Ephesians – Ephesians 1:13-14 – Paul says,

In him [that is, in Christ] you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy

Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Here Paul says that those who have believed in Christ have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. As a Christian, you are regenerated by and indwelt with the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit, Paul says, seals you and is the guarantee of your inheritance until you acquire possession of it. So it is this indwelling Holy Spirit who will preserve you and keep you in the faith until you go to be home with the Lord in glory.

So on the basis of passages like these the Calvinist would affirm the slogan “once saved, always saved.” You cannot lose your salvation. If you are genuinely regenerated as a Christian, then God will keep you in the faith and you will persevere until the end. Therefore, one cannot fall away from the faith and lose one’s salvation.

Those passages in isolation seem pretty compelling. But there is another set of passages in the New Testament which is a challenge to this view and is difficult for the Reformed theologian to deal with. I am thinking here of passages in which the Scripture warns us of the danger of apostasy; that is to say, the danger of falling away from the faith. There are passages in the New Testament that seem to contemplate the possibility of apostasy; that is to say, turning your back on Christ, casting him out of your life, and in effect going back to a non-Christian status.

Look at the book of Hebrews, for example, for passages of this sort that are especially riveting and clear. Hebrews 6:1-8 concerns such warnings which are, I think, very sobering. The author says,

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

Now that dramatic illustration between the fruitful crop-bearing land and the worthless land that brings forth thorns and thistles rather than good fruit is a dramatic analogy between the believer and the apostate. The author says that in the end the wretched land will be burned – you clear that land of its thorns and thistles by burning it. He says here

that if these persons commit apostasy, it is impossible to restore them again to repentance. These people who have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift and the powers of the age to come, if they commit apostasy, then it is impossible for them to be restored again to repentance. Their end is to be burned. They seemed to have forfeited their salvation.

If that were not enough, turn over to Hebrews 10:26-31 where the author reiterates these terrible warnings. There he says,

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Again, obviously all of us on occasion sin after becoming a Christian. I think on some occasions we sin deliberately as well, don't we? We know it's wrong but due to weakness or rebelliousness we sin anyway. The author is not talking about that type of sin. Rather, I think that the author is talking about the same thing as he did in chapter 6. If a person commits apostasy, that is to say, he deliberately chooses to renounce Christ, to walk away from the faith and abandon Christ, then he says there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. That would make sense of why he said before that it is impossible to restore them again to repentance, since they crucified the Son of God on their own account. There no longer remains a sacrifice for sin, but all that remains, he says, is this fearful prospect of judgment. So he speaks of the man who has spurned the Son of God and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified. He is evidently warning Christians here not to commit apostasy (not to fall away) because God is going to judge. It is, he says, a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

So how, from a Calvinistic perspective, are we to understand these sorts of warnings against apostasy? Typically, the Calvinist will propose two ways of understanding these warnings. First, some Calvinists will say the persons being described here are not really Christians. They are at best nominal Christians – people who are Christians in name only. But they are not genuine, born-again, regenerate Christians who have been declared righteous by God. So if you look at Hebrews 6, they will point out that it speaks of these people as having “tasted” the heavenly gift. They've “tasted” the goodness of the Word of God. They haven't really drunk it deeply and imbibed it. They just sort of sampled it.

Maybe they've been in the context of a Christian congregation or a local church and they benefited from being part of it, they've gone through the motions, but they aren't really regenerate, born-again Christians. For these people to reject Christ, to walk away from him, is simply a continuation of their own unregenerate state and not a matter of someone's falling away from the faith.

Other Calvinist theologians, however, have taken a quite different perspective on these passages. What they point out is that the Holy Spirit uses means to preserve Christians in the faith. He doesn't just zap them so as to make them persevere. Rather, he will use *means* by which he will bring about their perseverance: for example, Bible reading, prayer, the preaching of the Word of God, participation in the Lord's Supper, and the exercise of your spiritual gifts in a local fellowship. All of these would be means by which the Holy Spirit will help to keep you and persevere in your Christian faith. And so these theologians will say one of the means that the Holy Spirit uses to help the elect persevere are precisely these warnings. These warnings are the means by which God ensures that the elect will persevere. By putting these frightening warnings in Scripture, God brings it about that when the elect read them, they realize the consequences of walking away from Christ; and therefore they will not do so.

So the warnings are not meant to show that it is a real possibility that you could actually fall away from your faith; rather they are the means by which the Holy Spirit ensures that you will not fall away from the faith because you will heed these warnings as you confront them.

So on the Calvinistic perspective, anyone who is a genuine, born again Christian will persevere in the faith. When we see examples of persons – and certainly there are many both in Scripture and in our churches today – who were either raised in Christian homes or were once involved in Christian service or even in Christian ministry and have then walked away from Christ and turned their backs on him and are now unbelievers (perhaps even atheists or agnostics), the Calvinist will say that those persons were never really Christians to begin with. They were only nominally Christian, but they weren't genuine Christians. Anyone who is a genuine believer, that is to say, a regenerate believer who has been declared righteous by God, that person will inevitably persevere in the faith. It is impossible for him to lose his salvation.

The next time we will look at a radically different Arminian perspective on this question.³⁷

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Lecture 19: Perseverance of the Saints - Arminianism

We have been talking about the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The question we are asking is this: can a genuinely regenerate Christian lose his salvation, or is it impossible for a person who has been saved to lose his salvation? Last time we looked at the Calvinistic perspective, or the Reformed perspective, on this question. We saw that according to Calvinism a person cannot lose his salvation. Once a person has been regenerated and declared righteous by God, that person can never fall away and therefore is eternally secure. If you do see someone who, despite having been an ostensibly authentic Christian (someone who was active in the Christian church, even in ministry), who falls away from the faith, the Calvinist will say that person was really only a nominal Christian. He is and always has been an unbeliever, an unregenerate person. He only appeared to be a Christian believer and therefore has not really lost salvation. He never had it to begin with.

Today we are going to look at a quite different perspective, which can be characterized as the Arminian perspective, after Jacob Arminius.

The Arminian maintains that it is possible for a person who is a born-again Christian to lose his salvation and go to perdition. What the Arminian will typically say is that the elect of God are corporately secure. You will remember, when we talked about the doctrine of election, that the Arminian construes election primarily in corporate terms and only secondarily in individual terms. That is to say, the primary object of God's election is a corporate body: a people, a church. It is that corporate group which is destined for sanctification, conformity to the image of Christ, and ultimately glorification and heaven. But it is up to the individual whether he wants to be a part of that elect corporate group or not. The primary object of election is this corporate body, and you by identifying yourself with it through faith in Christ become in a secondary sense elect or predestined.

Now, in line with that reasoning, the Arminian thinks that this corporate group is going to persevere and will never fail to obtain its promises. The corporate group is thus secure in salvation. But, just as individuals become members of the group by placing their faith in Christ, so they can fall away from that group by renouncing Christ. By ceasing to have faith in Christ and repudiating Christ, they are then no longer members of this elect group and thereby forfeit their salvation.

On the corporate nature of election and security, look at Romans 8:33-39. Here Paul says,

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us

from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Arminian takes this passage to be about the corporate body of the elect – the church of Jesus Christ. The elect are secure in God’s salvation, and so these promises will never be abrogated. The elect are thus safe and secure.

But the individual’s perseverance in the faith is contingent. Look, for example, at Romans 11:17-32. In this passage, Paul has a very interesting combination of what appears to be a corporate image and an individual image. He compares Israel to a cultivated olive tree which represents God’s elect. Then he thinks of individuals as branches that can be grafted onto this olive tree. The natural branches of this cultivated olive tree would be the Jewish people. Gentiles he compares to branches that have been taken off of a wild olive tree and then grafted into the cultivated olive tree. They thereby become heirs to all of the promises and the blessings that belong to Israel. The promises and the blessings are given to Israel (represented by the cultivated olive tree), but these branches cut off of wild olive trees are grafted into the trunk of the cultivated olive tree and therefore come to share in its blessings. Let’s read, with that in mind, Romans 11:17-32.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. You will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. And even the others, if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;
“and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”

As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may receive mercy. For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all.

What Paul seems to be saying here, the Arminian will say, is that this corporate tree (this tree representing God’s elect church) is composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews have in many cases been broken off – the branches were dead. Why? Because of their unbelief. Because of their unbelief these branches were stripped away, and in their place believing Gentiles have been grafted into the olive tree to share its blessings. But he says that is no reason for you Gentile believers to be proud because if you do not continue in faith then you too will be broken off just like those natural branches that were broken off. He says there is still hope that these natural branches might be grafted back in again. Indeed he thinks that in the future at some point all of Israel will be saved. After the full number of Gentiles come in, then Israel will turn back to Christ again and so be saved. So you see here a kind of corporate election and security that a person has insofar as he remains grafted into Christ – into his body. But if through unbelief one falls away, then one will be broken off and have no security.

Let’s turn to our representative Arminian theologian once again, Robert Shank, whose book *Elect in the Son* I’ve quoted before, to hear his take on this relationship between corporate election and individual contingency. He writes on page 49 of *Elect in the Son*,

The possibility of apostasy posits the corporate nature of the election.

The Scriptures bear witness to actual instances of apostasy and abound with solemn warnings against the peril, which (contrary to the assumptions of some) is real rather than hypothetical.³⁸

Consider Scriptures that Shank quotes. First, he says, consider those Scriptures showing God’s eternal purposes in grace. Ephesians 1:4, “He chose us in Christ that we should be

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Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), p. 49.

holy and blameless before him.” Colossians 1:22, “He reconciled us to himself in Christ through his death to present us holy and blameless before him.” So Shank would interpret God’s eternal purpose in grace to be that he has chosen this corporate group to be holy and blameless before him. This is his design: to have a people peculiar to himself who will be holy and blameless before him.

This purpose of God is fulfilled corporately. Consider Ephesians 5:27, “Christ will present the *ekklesia* [that is to say the church, the body of Christ], to Himself holy and blameless.” So God’s eternal purpose is fulfilled in the case of the church. The church will be presented by Christ holy and blameless before him.

But, Shank says, insofar as the individual believer is concerned, this is contingent upon his perseverance in the faith. Colossians 1:23 says, “He will present us holy and blameless before Him – if we continue in the faith grounded and settled and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel.” In the case of the individual this salvation is conditional. It is contingent. God’s eternal purpose in grace that we should be holy and blameless before him will be fulfilled in individuals, says Colossians 1:23, if we continue in the faith grounded and settled and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel.

Next week, we’ll come to some assessment of these competing views of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Until then I wish you a great week.³⁹

Lecture 20: Warnings Against Apostasy

Today we want to continue our discussion of an Arminian perspective on perseverance of the saints. We want to ask how the Arminian understands the warnings of Scripture against apostasy. The Arminian takes these warnings at face value and hence to involve a very real danger. It really is possible for a regenerate Christian to fall away from Christ and to lose his salvation.

First, these warnings, the Arminian will point out, are written to Christian believers. The persons to whom the warnings are addressed are not merely nominal Christians. These are not people who are in fact unsaved. Consider the book of Hebrews, for example. The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who, under the threat of persecution, were tempted to renounce Christ and go back to Judaism. This leads the author of the book of Hebrews to issue very stern warnings about their doing such a thing.

Hebrews 3:1 describes his readers as “holy brethren who share in a heavenly call,” and he invites them to consider Jesus “the apostle and high priest of our confession.” So he refers to his readers as holy brethren; he says they share in this heavenly call.

Look at verse 6 of chapter 3. He says, “Christ was faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.” Here he says that we are indwelt by Christ. We are the temple of Christ. He lives in us. We are his house. But he says this is the case only if we hold fast to our confidence and pride in our hope.

Look then at verses 12-14. He says,

Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

There it seems again clear that he is writing to fellow Christians – brethren he calls them – and says that they share in Christ. But he warns them that we share in Christ only if we hold fast to the end.

Finally, turn over to Hebrews 10:32-36. Here he says,

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great

reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Clearly this is a passage written to fellow Christians. He says that “you were enlightened” and then you endured affliction. He says “you knew that you had a better possession and an abiding possession” in heaven. So don’t throw this away; you need to endure.

So when we look at these warnings, the Arminian would say, these are warnings to us. These are warnings that are clearly written to regenerate Christians, not to people who are in fact unregenerate. When we read them in that light, then it seems clear that they entail the real possibility of falling away from Christ and so losing salvation. Look again at Hebrews 3:12-19. The author says,

Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end, while it is said,

“Today, when you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

Who were they that heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? And with whom was he provoked forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they should never enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Because of the danger of unbelief he wants them to be sure that there is not an unbelieving heart within them, an evil, unbelieving heart that will lead them to fall away from God.

Turn over now to Hebrews 6:1-8. He says,

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is

cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

The Arminian will point out that this description is surely a description of a regenerate Christian. Notice what it says about this person who falls away. It says this person was once enlightened. This is the same word that is used in Hebrews 10:32 to describe the recipients of the book of Hebrews where he says, “But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings.” He is describing how they became Christians. So to say that they were enlightened or that this person has been enlightened is to say that this person has become a regenerate Christian.

It says that this person has “tasted” the heavenly gift and has “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.” When you think of this idiom of tasting, it doesn’t mean just sort of having a little sample but not really imbibing it. Look how the author uses the same word in Hebrews 2:9 to describe Christ’s death on our behalf. He says, “But we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one.” Now clearly it means that Christ, in tasting death for everyone, died. He experienced death, not just have a little sampling of it. He was dead. While “tasting death” may be a peculiar idiom for dying, nevertheless to say that these people had tasted the goodness of the word of God, the powers of the age to come, and the heavenly gift, I think, is to say they have found salvation.

Notice also that it says they have become partakers of the Holy Spirit. Now, again, this same word is used in Hebrews 3:14. There he says, “For we share in Christ, [in the Greek, this is the same word – we are partakers in Christ] if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.” So to be a partaker in the Holy Spirit is like being a partaker in Christ – one shares in Christ, one shares in the Holy Spirit. This is a description of a regenerate believer. So the description here of an apostate person, I think, is clearly intended to be a description of a regenerate believer who then apostatizes and rejects Christ out of his life.

I think it has been rightly said that if the Reformed theologian is correct in saying that this can be a description of someone who is not a regenerate Christian, then none of us can have assurance of salvation. For how could you have any more potent a description of a Christian than this? If a person can be like this and not be saved, how can any of us have assurance that we are in fact saved? So paradoxically enough, interpreting the passage to be not about regenerate Christians robs us of the assurance of our salvation that is rightly ours.

Finally, look at Hebrews 10:26-31:

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Notice here the person that is being described is someone who spurns Christ and thereby profanes Christ’s blood by which he was sanctified. This is a person who was sanctified by the blood of Christ. It says he has “outraged the Spirit of grace.” Remember we saw in Hebrews 6 that this is a person who was a partaker of the Holy Spirit. Now by rejecting Christ out of his life he outrages the Holy Spirit. This calls to mind the unpardonable sin – doesn’t it? – of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that all sins will be forgiven except for one, namely, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Could it be that apostasy is a form of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? That is why to outrage the Spirit of grace by which we are sanctified by casting Christ out of one’s life leaves one with no more sacrifice for the person who has done that. He’s lost. There is no more hope for him. That would make sense of why blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would be unpardonable – because there remains no more sacrifice for such a sin.

If this is right, then you suddenly find when you read the New Testament that it is filled with warnings like this. Maybe you never noticed them because you never read them in this light. Look for example at 2 Peter 2:20-22. He writes,

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, The dog turns back to his own vomit, and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire.

What an incredible image here of the apostate person! Peter says it would be better for this person never, ever to have known the way of salvation than having known it, having come to a knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to turn back from it. He compares the apostate to a dog that eats its own vomit and to a pig that is washed from the slop only to then jump back into it again and to wallow in the mire. This is certainly a powerful image of apostasy!

Look at John 15, which is the words of Jesus. John 15:1-6. This is the famous parable of the vine and the branches. Jesus says,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

Here you have this same corporate image of the vine which is Christ's people and then the individual branches. The branches that do not abide in the vine wither up and die and they are thrown away. They are burned; they are good for nothing. It is the branches that remain in the vine, attached to it, that bear fruit.

From what I've said, on an Arminian perspective it isn't a matter of slipping in and out of salvation by sinning. Rather, we are talking here about the very, very serious sin of apostasy. That is to say, someone who renounces Christ and rejects him out of his life and walks away from Christ in a very deliberate and conscious way. There are examples in Scripture of people who do this, and I'm sure we all know examples of Christians that we've known or even ministers or worship leaders that we've known who have done this. So we are not talking here about slipping in and out of salvation in your daily living. We are talking here about whether or not it is possible to commit this very serious sin of apostasy.

That would represent an Arminian perspective on this problem. Next time, we'll come to some assessment of these competing views of Calvinism and Arminianism with respect to the perseverance of the saints. Until then I wish you God's riches blessings.⁴⁰

Lecture 21: Assessment of the Competing Views on Perseverance

Last time we looked at an Arminian perspective on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We saw that in Arminian theology election is regarded as primarily corporate and only secondarily individual, insofar as the individual chooses to align himself with that elect corporate body. Accordingly the elect corporately are secure. God's church will be brought to sanctification, glorification, and eternal life; but individually salvation, sanctification, and glorification is not guaranteed. That depends upon the individual believer's maintaining his faith in Christ and continuing to be part of that elect body. Should the believer apostatize or reject Christ or cease to believe, he falls away from grace and accordingly forfeits salvation and is no longer a part of that elect body which is secure through faith.

Today I would like to come to some assessment of the competing views that we've looked at (namely, Calvinism and Arminianism) with respect to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We've seen that there is an apparent conflict between various texts in the New Testament on this subject. There are certainly texts that speak of the security of the individual believer – that he will persevere to the end and that he cannot fall away from salvation. On the other hand, we have these equally clear texts that warn seriously about the dangers of apostasy and falling from grace and forfeiting salvation. So the question is: how do you best integrate these two streams of biblical teaching?

One could just say that the biblical authors disagreed about this subject. That John, for example, who often writes about the eternal security of the believer in Christ, disagreed with (or would disagree with, if he could speak with him) the author of the book of Hebrews, who clearly thought that Christians could apostatize and fall away from grace and be lost. So these biblical authors simply disagreed on the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

But apart from the theological problems of saying that the Bible contains contradictory teaching on this subject, the problem with this solution is that these conflicting texts are not found simply between different authors in the New Testament, they are found within the same author on this subject in the New Testament. For example, some of the most important texts about the security and perseverance of the believer are written by Paul, but at the same time we also saw the many warnings that Paul issues, for example, concerning the branches that could be broken off of the olive tree that represented the elect body of believers if they failed to persevere in faith in Christ. So this conflict is probably more apparent than real, since Paul would not likely be in conflict with himself.

I suspect that we have a situation here rather like the apparent conflict that exists between Paul and James on the subject of justification by faith alone. There seems to be a conflict between Paul and James, but in fact if you probe deeper it is very likely that if Paul and James were to sit down together and discuss this they would agree – that a faith which does not issue in good works is a dead, sterile faith that will not save and that genuine saving faith is inevitably accompanied by good works which are evidence of genuine faith. So there is no real conflict between Paul and James on this subject. I could imagine a similar dialogue taking place between the author of the Gospel of John and the author of the book of Hebrews in settling their apparent differences on the subject of perseverance.

As I look at their respective texts and what they have to say about this subject, it seems to me that it is much more likely that John would say, “Well, I didn’t mean that no one could ever apostatize when I said that ‘no one is able to snatch them out of my hand’ or that ‘all that the Father gives me will come to me.’ I wasn’t thinking about apostasy when I wrote that. I wouldn’t disagree with you.” I think that it is more likely that John would say that than that the author of the book of Hebrews would say, “Well, I didn’t really imagine that Christians could apostatize. I wasn’t really talking about Christians when I said that these people who have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, and the power of the age to come could fall away.” It seems to me that the warnings in the book of Hebrews are so clear and so unambiguous that they simply can’t be explained away by saying that the persons to whom the author wrote or the persons he is talking about aren’t genuine Christians.

I read some time ago a very interesting article on perseverance which was given to me by someone in the class by a contemporary Calvinist theologian, Thomas Schreiner, who teaches at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.⁴¹ It was striking that Schreiner, who is himself a Calvinist, agrees that these warnings in the New Testament are so clear and so unambiguous that they can’t be explained away in that way. He says that he would in fact himself be an Arminian if he did not already believe in the doctrine of unconditional election. This is what he writes on page 58 of his article “Perseverance and Assurance:”

If I were not convinced of unconditional election, I would surely be an Arminian. The warning passages are so strong that I can understand why many think that believers can lose their salvation. What is interesting to me is that there are so many believers who reject unconditional election and yet they hold on to eternal security.

⁴¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Spring 1998, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 32-62. See http://www.sbts.edu/documents/tschreiner/2.1_article.pdf (accessed December 20, 2020).

Obviously, he is thinking there of many of his Baptist brethren who reject the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election and yet want to continue to hold to eternal security. Schreiner says that sort of position just doesn't make sense because these warning passages are so clear and unambiguous that if you take them at face value they indicate that falling away is possible, unless you are already committed to a Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election. Of course, then, that is to simply throw the issue back onto another subject, and we already discussed the doctrine of election in a previous class. You may remember that I gave a Molinist perspective on that doctrine that I think makes good sense of the doctrine of election. So not being committed to the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional election, I find myself agreeing with Schreiner that these warnings are so clear that one really ought to be an Arminian and think that apostasy is possible.

Schreiner himself adopts the view that the warnings are the means by which God guarantees perseverance. You'll remember we saw that some Calvinist theologians think that these warnings are the very means by which God ensures that the elect will persevere. But it seems to me that here the Calvinist, and Schreiner in particular, is confusing two quite distinct questions:

1. *Will* any elect person fall away?
2. *Can* an elect person fall away?

These are two very distinct questions that are often conflated by the Calvinist. The first question is a *de facto* question – is it in fact the case that any elect people *will* fall from grace and lose salvation? Will that happen? That is a *de facto* question. The second question is a modal question. That is to say, it is about what can or cannot happen. Is it *possible* for an elect person to fall away? Not that any will; perhaps no one will. But nevertheless is it possible? *Can* an elect person lose his salvation?

These two questions are very distinct and can be answered differently by the theologian. Schreiner confuses these two questions. On page 52 of his article, he asks, “How can an individual, though, at the same time be assured that he will never apostatize, and also believe that he may commit apostasy?” That is very easy to explain because one is a modal question and the other is a *de facto* question. To give an illustration, let's suppose that Thomas Schreiner *will* never commit adultery. He will go to his grave a chaste and pure man. He will never commit adultery. Does it therefore follow that he *cannot* commit the sin of adultery? Obviously not! In fact, God could assure Schreiner that he will never commit adultery. We can imagine God giving him a prophetic word that, “You will not commit adultery. You will stay true to me and chaste until the end.” Does that mean that Schreiner will therefore be incapable of committing adultery? Obviously not! He *can* commit adultery, but he *won't*. He is able to – that's the modal question – but the answer to the *de facto* question is that he won't.

Perhaps what you are seeing here is that beneath the surface is this old debate between divine foreknowledge and human freedom, the fatalistic idea that if God knows what will happen, then everything happens necessarily. We dealt with this question in our treatment of divine omniscience, where we saw that this inference is simply logically fallacious. Even if God knows that you will not apostatize, it doesn't follow that you cannot apostatize. You could apostatize but you won't. So God's assuring you that you will not is in no way incompatible with your ability to fall away.

In this light, consider the interpretation that the Calvinist gives of the warnings against apostasy as the means by which God guarantees the perseverance of the elect. I submit that all this gives us is that the elect *will* not fall away, but it does not show that they *cannot* fall away. In fact, quite the contrary, what this view presupposes is that the person can fall away, but by giving him these warnings God ensures that he will in fact persevere. So the warnings view – that is to say, interpreting the warnings as the means by which God brings about the perseverance of the saints – actually presupposes that the elect can fall away. Otherwise, why give them the warnings? If it is impossible for the elect to fall away, why give them warnings? The warnings are superfluous on such a view. But if you say that the warnings are the means by which God ensures perseverance, then what you are saying is that the elect can fall away – they can apostatize – but God gave these warnings to them so that, sobered by the stark warnings that they hear, they will in fact endure to the end and be saved.

So on this view God knows that if he were to give these warnings, then the elect would heed them and persevere. The elect can fall away, but they won't because God knows that if they were to receive these warnings, then they would heed the warnings and so persevere. Now, that's not Calvinism, is it? What view is that? It's Molinism! So this view of the warnings as the means of guaranteeing perseverance is really a Molinist perspective on perseverance, not a Calvinistic perspective. What the Molinist could say is that God knows what gifts of grace, what warnings, what Scriptural admonitions, would ensure the free perseverance of the elect and their ultimate salvation. So it seems to me that this view is actually not a Calvinistic view at all. It is really a hidden Molinist view disguised as a Calvinistic view.

I would say, therefore, that I think the Scripture teaches that an elect person can fall away. I think that is the import of these warnings. Whether or not you think that any elect person will fall away is probably going to depend, not on those warning passages but on how you regard the examples in Scripture of people like Judas Iscariot,⁴² or Demas (whom Paul says “*has left me, he's in love with the world, and he's gone back*”),⁴³ or

⁴² cf. Matthew 26:14-16

⁴³ cf. 2 Timothy 4:10

Hymenaeus and Alexander (who “*had made shipwreck of their faith*”).⁴⁴ There are a number of people who are apparent apostates in the New Testament. Whether or not you think that these people actually are elect people who fell away will determine how you judge issues of that sort.

So, in my view, it seems to me that the view that makes the best sense of both of these streams of scriptural teaching is to say that the elect can fall away, they can apostatize and lose their salvation, but that God will do what lies within his power to give them warnings and admonitions and gifts of grace so as to ensure that they will, in fact, persevere to the end and be saved.

Let me, in our waning moments, share a few words of practical application of this lesson that I think will be applicable to all of us, whether you are Calvinist, Arminian, or just plain confused.

1. *This is an exhortation to all of us to self-examination.* We need to examine ourselves to see if we are holding to the faith, if we are persevering and being true. Hebrews 3:12 says, “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.” We need to keep short accounts with God, to not let unconfessed sin accumulate in our lives, to check our hearts to see if it is growing unbelieving and cold toward God. Paul will often say “test yourself to see if you are holding to your faith.”

2. *This underlines the importance of meeting together for mutual encouragement.* In the third chapter of Hebrews, Hebrews 3:13, the author goes on to say, “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Then in Hebrews 10:23-25, he says,

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

I tremble, frankly, when I hear young Christians say, “I don’t like church, therefore, I don’t attend church. I just sort of try to do things on my own.” That is a dangerous, dangerous path to tread. We need one another. Therefore he says we should not neglect to meet together as is the habit of some but all the more meet together, stir one another up, encourage one another, and help one another to make sure you are holding to the faith. I think a class like Defenders is a prime example of where we can do just that to encourage and support one another in our Christian walk.

⁴⁴ cf. 1 Timothy 1:19-20

3. *When we see someone who is a backslidden Christian, we should always assume that he hasn't crossed the line of no return and try to bring him back.* We can't know if that person is apostate or not. Only God knows his heart. Look at James 5:19-20. James says,

My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Here James is talking about one of the brethren – a genuine believer – who wanders away from the truth and then some other Christian brings him back to faith. He says you will save his soul from death. He was on a slippery slide to perdition, and God managed through your ministry in his life to bring him back and to save his soul and cover a multitude of sins. So don't ever give up on a backslidden or apparently apostate Christian because we never really know. We see only the externals. I think in line with what James says, we should always assume that it is possible for that person to come back to Christ and so try to bring him back.

That is the practical application of what we've seen. No matter what you think about perseverance, all of us should agree that we need to engage in self-examination to test our hearts periodically, to mutually encourage one another in the faith and try to help one another to love and good works, and finally to help a brother or sister who is wandering from the truth and seek to bring them back and encourage them in their walk with God.

That brings us to the end of our locus on the doctrine of salvation. Next time we'll commence a new locus on the doctrine of the church.⁴⁵